

ROGUE WORLDS

#14 

FEATURING

Ian Simmons

J.D. Welles

Lee Ann Houry

James S. Dorr

Donna Taylor Burgess

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Publisher and Managing Editor

Doyle Eldon Wilmoth, Jr

Book Reviewer

Jason Brannon

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Reviews

Send requests to (Jason Brannon): jason_brannon@bellsouth.net

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THE HARVESTER

DONNA TAYLOR BURGESS

It's not an Urban Legend

Because the punchline is not found in

A bathtub filled with ice and followed by nervous laughter.

Besides, in this story, it's the little ones that are opened, Split around the back and sides or unzipped up the middle.

Perfumed in Johnson's No More Tears and sunshine dust, The sweet pink parts are stolen.

A heart isn't broken if it is only used once, you know And only for a short time.

Eyes fated to see more than one life will not lose their light.

And lungs—those pretty, silky balloons—Where would the party be without them?

Made for much more than only a few summer swims, Inflating in bony, hollow chests.

Skin is made to share,

To be grafted onto wounds too gruesome to describe here.

Shadows are more ominous things

When they move like ghosts in reverse

And weld silver ribbons of steel

Glinting in moonlight in one hand and beaten red coolers Filled with dry ice and God only knows in the other.

REENTRY

LIDA BROADHURST

Stuffed in crossword puzzle room,
six steps across, eight down, we pace
trying to fill the blanks with memories.

But the squares shine white as bones. A bench
stretches in the corner, narrow as
fingernail, if someone thinks to rest.

So what if we are called, we cannot
remember names, printed on other
clothes, now crumpled far away,
in no familiar closet. Robes flung at us
like manna, tie flat. Ribs protrude, but

no pocket for messages.

Only blood speaks for us. Impossible
to dam scarlets and crimsons embroidering
guilt across our backs, our wrists,
cresting on the round flesh of our legs.

Now just a lamp stares, familiar as any star,
assigned no name.

Rubber soles whisper across an outside floor.
Doors grunt open, sigh closed, sounds not of
our breath. Other voices rasp: rats at the river,
sharing secrets.

THE DEAD DON'T DANCE

JAMES S. DORR

Dead people do not dance
no matter what
you may have learned
of zombie balls,
of jamborees—
they do make music,
clack, clack, clacks
of crumbling tarsals on hard stone,
a rib-cage *thrumm*,
but motion over-violent jars
joints held with tendons
now half dust,
skulls fall from spines,
and any soft parts left are prone
to slipping down.
It is this reason why
no matter what you see
on clouded nights
of *totentanzen*—
what you *hear*—
dead do not dance.

LAST DANCE

BRIAN ROSENBERGER

She swallows cheap whiskey
sweetened with tears
imagining Absinthe
smooth on an October's eve

Her mascara smeared
black and heavy
like Frankenstein boots

From her Tarot
she pulls The Maiden
crayoned on the reverse
her farewell to the world
postage already paid

The cemetery hushed
save for sobs and staggering footsteps
high heeled and fishnets
mimicking cobwebs
Ghoul girl counts the seconds
till Armageddon

Disturbed earth
a fog caress for mood
he rises to greet her
a smile he can't hide
due to lack of flesh
some things can't stayed buried

Bent over tombstone
he takes her
exposed metacarpals meeting
warm flesh
his coccyx pressed against the contour
of her hip
graveyard breath
the taste of calcium on her lips

Bone on skin
she can feel every rib
two lovers

one an ex, the other just exhumed
dance a skeletal serenade
the moon, jealous
watches through clouds
the color of nightmare

ON AN ANNIVERSARY

JASON DANIEL SMITH

I told my ghost I missed her skin
from my expanse of bed
that bell-sick morning
and stroked where once her hair
had been.

Not a peep from the missing flesh
though the birds all lived
to answer bells.
I sighed toward eternity
wondering if I should meet her there.

The goddess ghost cramped
my starving tongue
with her droning name.
Sly poison savior sealed
the shift into the spirit-grave.

As I left to find my love
the flesh flaked loose
like aged metal.
Irony, that two-faced bitch,
reeked ethereally like rotting angels.

I found her howling,
dying twice,
crying for an earth-held lover.
It wasn't me for whom she wailed—
I'm damned to stand my revelation.

FOR THE EAR DEPARTED

DANIEL R. ROBICHAUD

I lost my ear today. Don't laugh.
I felt it rip free. Hurt as bad
as when I lost my eye, my nose,
my lips and fingers, toes and guts ...

It's been quite a shock. I wasn't
prepared. I saw all those movies.
You know the type: "Aim for the head!"
Film's living dead were Like-Us-But-Not.
Shambling, mindless Corpses-That-Move.
Lies, all of it lies.

So, what's true?
We remain aware. My ear, my
toes and guts, my fingers and eye....
I felt them all rot or drop free.

Some sensation: decomposition.
It's rather like a burn so bad,
your flesh slides off at slightest pressure.
Imagine how that might be
if all your nerves were still alive ...
Firing-firing as they stretch-stretch-snap.
If agony were light, this would
be bright and hot. Supernova suns
at point blank range. By all rights, I
should be melting. One combustion
and whoompf. No pain.

Instead, I'm stuck
still walking and running. Driven
by hungers for meat. Why, God, meat?
In life, I was vegetarian.

I hope you never experience
your insides slipping out, your privates
dripping off, your face sliding free
while nerves refuse to die, die, die.

Where is Novocain from repetition?
Shouldn't we acclimate to

pain? Shouldn't we lose awareness?
Why must we feel this misery?

Will someone please find me a way
to end it all?

THE HOLE

J.D. WELLES

The beast crawled out of the hole six months ago. The beast, horrible and terrible and wonderful, crawled out of the hole six months ago, leaving behind a wake of destruction, paranoia and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Gordon was in therapy. Everyone was in therapy.

Everyone except the Two Thousand, but they had issue, too.

Oh, yeah, the Two Thousand had issues.

Gordon's were much simpler. A little anger—okay, a lot of anger, mostly generational. Self-esteem problems. Stress. Anxiety.

And a fascination with the hole.

It wasn't that he was drawn to the hole. He wasn't one of the rubbernecks on the endless road construction called Downtown.

No, the rubbernecks were his bread and butter. He was a vendor and the hole was the souvenir.

"Did you see it?"

"No."

Gordon rearranged his first line of tchokes, the little rubber beasts with their seven plastic heads and the little crowns that fell off after the first day. Made in China? Not even. Made in Flatbush, more like it.

"Did you actually see it?"

"I didn't," Gordon said. He hated kids.

"What was it like? Really?"

"I didn't see it. I watched it on TV. Like everyone else!"

Gordon shouted the last part at the stupid kid, waving his arms and knocking over a couple of cut glass—actually plastic—towers filled with artistically arranged bubbles shaped to look like the dragon.

The kid ran back to his mommy. Smart kid.

The towers weren't half bad, Gordon had to admit, as he set them back right. They pretty much looked like the dragon—well, like he looked on TV.

The stupid kid rankled him, though.

He watched the beast on TV. Everyone watched the beast on TV. He could have walked the half-mile to the site himself, but he stayed at home and watched the beast on TV.

He cried. Like everyone else. He watched the beast emerge, over and over again, on TV. Like everyone else.

He quit his job. Not quite like everyone else.

That was six months ago and two dozen unaffordable therapy appointments later.

Now Gordon was back to work, his unemployment benefits spent. Gordon had found a new job.

Gordon sold shit on the brink of destruction. Gordon sold crap on the edge of the world.

Gordon sold cheap plastic trinkets on the lip of the hole.

It was a living.

And most days weren't bad, just the same. He'd even dealt with kids like that kid before. But today, it rankled him.

"What are you doing?"

Gordon knew the look, even if he didn't know the uniform from TV. That full-crazy, half-sane—and that was 50% too much—stare. Those blue-black eyes. The white—not blond—hair.

A 2K.

"Souvenir?" He offered a plastic beast.

The 2K frowned and one of the ten crowns, the third from the left, fell to the pavement where it melted down into the concrete. "Abominations."

"It's a living."

"Is it?"

Gordon had read about the holy fire in the mouths of the Two Thousand; he'd even seen it on TV in one of those Fox News recreations.

But in reality, the holy fire was nothing like that green-screen, CGI bullshit.

It was real. Really real.

Holy fire.

"Holy shit!" Gordon yelped and dropped the flaming plastic toy. It sizzled, collapsing in on itself before it disintegrated into nothingness.

"What do you want?" He managed around his fingers, which he'd stuffed into his mouth to cool them.

"You." The blue-black eyes blazed.

"Me?"

"You are one of the 144,000. You have been chosen."

"Me?" It was a little hard to believe.

"You are one of the 144,000."

"I'm confused." And Gordon was. Sums were never his strength. That's why he kept a calculator within easy reach on his folding card table. "Aren't you guy the 2K—'cuse me, the Two Thousand? What's with the One-Four-Four K?"

Gordon liked the sound of One-Four-Four K. It sounded safe, like the retirement plan.

Then he remembered what happened to 401 K plans since the beast.

"And maybe I don't want to be a One-Four-Four K, huh? What about that?"

The 2K stared at him, his face unreadable. As if a person would want to peruse a mug like that. Probably read like a grocery store tabloid.

"You are one of the 144,000."

Gordon sighed. There was no arguing with the 2K and he was scaring away the customers. “What does that mean?”

“You will stand against the beast and the dragon.”

“Stand against—” Gordon swept his arm over his table. “The beast is my frickin’ livelihood!”

“You will stand against the beast and the dragon.”

Gordon laughed and waved his hand at the 2K. “Go away. You’re ruining my business.”

He didn’t expect it to work, but the 2K had disappeared.

Sales were shitty, as if the miasma of his visitor clung to his table, chasing the tourists away. He unloaded a couple of guides, one photo album of beast shots, all ripped off the AP wire services, and a blow up beast doll that went to a gimpy guy in a trench coat he hoped he’d never see again.

That was becoming typical. Tourists, if they were really tourists, who scared the crap out of him. Or rankled him.

Things were getting worse out there.

To relax, Gordon sat at home in the soft glow of the evening news. A few more died in some rioting over the new identification system. Bar coding the populace, opponents said, and bar codes begin with the number 666. The number of the beast.

Gordon inspected lots of purported photos of the beast—to nose out the fakes so he could pass them on to the stupidest of the tourists—and ten out of ten, the fakes were the ones that showed a numbered beast. Mostly they tried to pass off the number like a tattoo on the tail, but Gordon had never seen a true picture with the number visible—or even possibly present.

“Superstitious sheep,” Gordon said to his first can of beer.

Two beers later, he ordered a plain pizza from down the block. Tomorrow was his day off. A large pie would keep him occupied until the Monday bagel and black coffee.

There were reruns from before the beast, “Seinfeld,” then “Friends,” then more news. He accounted for his inventory a second time, hoping to find he’d sold something he missed earlier, and had a fourth beer.

Halfway through it, the door buzzed and Gordon glanced at his watch. An hour and forty-five minutes. Not too bad—for a time since the beast.

“Who’s it?” Gordon called through the door. He had one of those peephole things drilled in his apartment door, but some punks spray painted over it almost six months ago.

He never bothered to scrape the paint off.

“Pizza.”

So he opened the door.

“You are one of the 144,000.”

As an afterthought, the 2K offered the cold cardboard square. “Here is your pizza.”

“Thanks.” Gordon handed him a ten.

The 2K examined it. “No tip?”

“Fuck you.”

Gordon slammed the door in the 2K’s face.

Sated and sprawled across his couch, Gordon fiddled through the greasy napkins stained with sauce and oil and the cold slices, stumbling on the pizza joint menu.

Or not the menu, he thought and squinted his eyes at the paper flyer, a red, white and blue monstrosity obviously aimed at the lowest common denominator.

That’s me, Gordon thought and read: “You’re more than a number. You’re an army of 144,000. Join today. Report to your local recruiting station at 813 Broadway.”

The address was penciled in above a muscled he-man brandishing more weaponry than the arsenal of an average Third World army.

Gordon laughed and started to ball the flyer up for scrap when he remembered the holy fire.

Should a guy fuck with something that could do that? He uncrumpled the paper and reread “You’re more than a number ...”

No, a guy should not fuck with that.

Gordon was up earlier than he wanted to be, the pizza sitting more uneasily in his stomach on its second day.

Just as well, though, to be up. He was going to the recruitment center. Not to join up, or anything, just to check it out.

The Korean guy at the deli—or the Asian guy at the deli, maybe, since the beast, deli guys weren’t Koreans anymore—looked at Gordon warily. When he held out his three bits for the morning cup of joe, the guy stared as if the father of the country might reanimate and bite him.

“No thank you. You keep it,” the guy said.

Gordon took a sip of the coffee and meant to shrug his thanks. Instead, his mouth opened and a thunderous voice he could’ve sworn wasn’t his, proclaimed, “I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.”

The Korean guy reached under the counter for a baseball bat and Gordon made quickly for the door.

He was taking this recruiting thing way too seriously. Although the coffee was a little cold.

813 Broadway was a school—or had been—before the beast and the hole and the 144 K. Lately the building had acquired the proper air of a military installation and the neighbors had already lodged complaints with their city council members. Strange comings and goings at all hours of the day and night—and those 2K!

Rents in the vicinity were plummeting. Shockwaves were being felt in the West Village and as far away as Chelsea and TriBeCa.

None of this mattered to Gordon who looked at the façade and almost—almost—went back home. Taking in the austere grayness of the graffiti-free face of the building—no 666 spray-painted here for luck—and the iron bars and the razor wire, Gordon felt flabby, stupid and lazy.

Better to stick to what he knew—hawking tchokes on the edge of the hole.

“Welcome. Gordon.”

In his reverie, Gordon missed the stately 2K stationed at the front door. The soldier smiled, in that way that 2 K could be said to smile, and motioned for him to come inside.

Gordon followed, up the chipped, trash-free stone steps and into a hallway rank with the stale stink of physical exertion. He was not comfortable; he really wanted to go back home.

“You’ll like it here,” the 2K said, laying a brotherly paw on Gordon’s shoulder.

Gordon sank under it. “You think so?”

The 2K’s eyes flickered, in a laugh. “I know you will.”

“Okay,” Gordon said, but he meant ‘Get me the hell out of here.’

The 2K led him past a bulletin board pasted with maps and wanted notices—SW 144 K Seeking Same for establishment of new kingdom on earth—to a gymnasium. It had been a gymnasium when school kids roamed the halls; it was a gymnasium still, although the games played now were a little different.

“Okay, there, Brooklyn? You’re gonna want to really anchor that. The RPG-7 has a killer kick-back, knock you right on your ass. Right. Aim for the head. The, uh, first head.”

One entire wall of the gym belonged to a gigantic inflatable thing, the kind of rubber monstrosity employed to advertise used car lots. There were seven heads on the thing, two gorilla, two crab, two llama-ish and one, a bright-eyed, pink-cheeked little girl in blond pigtails.

The assorted soldiers, maybe a half dozen of them, took potshots at the inflated horror while a 2 K shouted orders at them

“Aim for the heads, Bronx! Aim for the heads!”

Gordon sighed and slumped in his space. “No way, man. I’m going home.”

The 2K blinked blankly at him, the flicker of his amusement disappearing. “It’s too late. Gordon.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Gordon didn’t move away. He only sighed and slumped some more. “I’m not anybody. And I’m not this. These guys—and girls—are crazy. I’m not crazy. I’m just a guy. A single guy. A lonely guy. An alone guy. I’ve always just been a number. Okay?”

“No. Not okay. It’s too late. Gordon.” The laughter came back in the blue-black eyes and the 2K held out an automatic pistol. “You’re one of us.”

Gordon sighed and took the gun.

Gordon dreamed about the hole. He dreamed about the hole all the time. They weren’t even nightmares—or weren’t always nightmares. Sometimes, in his dreams, it was just a slow day, no sales and a slight breeze, perched on the edge of the hole.

Then he’d wake up missing his old job. And good bagels. But there wasn’t any time for a 144 K to miss anything for long. They were at war now. They were in battle.

They were up against the beast.

Gordon was number 13, 571, USA NYC Company M. There were two of them in Company M—for Manhattan—Gordon and number 805.

Gordon hated 805. The low numbers all thought they were special, like they were chosen first or something. The 2 K insisted it wasn’t so, that the numbering system was completely random.

But try telling that to 805.

“Jesus. It’s cold,” Gordon said out loud. He checked his equipment in the crisp morning air. Gun clean, ammo full.

Someone from USA NYC Company SI coughed and rolled over onto her side.

“What’re you shootin’ your mouth off about?”

“Nothing, 805.”

“Alright, 13, 571,” 805 said the number real slow, dragging it out, making it sound larger than it was. “Just keep it down. Some of us are still sleepin’.”

“Okay, 805.” There wasn’t any way to draw that out, but Gordon tried.

805 smirked and closed his eyes. Making a face no one else could see, Gordon reached into his flak jacket and fingered a plastic beast—for luck. They’d spent enough time with the plastics. Now it was time for the real thing.

In the flesh.

Gordon wondered what kind of flesh and were the reports from the front true—that one of the heads had been wounded?

Because he couldn’t be sure. Lots of stories came back from the front as the front crept closer to them. That’s why they’d dug in, entrenched themselves, to use the proper term, and that’s what they were waiting for. For the front to find them.

And it was coming. Probably today.

“Arise, soldiers.” The 2K was firm, but surprisingly gentle as he moved through the sleeping men and women. “Arise. Our time is here.”

Gordon, already arised, half-saluted. The 2K came to him and knelt down in front of him.

“Gordon. I give you the name of God.” The 2K raised his right hand and scrawled a few lines on Gordon’s forehead with a grease paint pencil.

Gordon resisted the urge to touch it, in case he might smear the writing. The name of God. Well, it was no more ridiculous than the body paint of the Scots or the Berserkers or the Native Americans.

The 2K continued through USA NYC, getting on his knees before each soldier and giving out the name of God. It didn't look like G-O-D to Gordon.

It was probably Hebrew. The 2K were big on Hebrew.

"This's it," 805 said to no one in particular.

Gordon answered him, hoping it annoyed the low number. "Yeah. It is. It."

"Got any regrets?"

"Yeah. One. I would've liked to get laid first."

805 stared at him.

"You know, gotten married and everything first. I just would've liked to get laid. Just once, you know?"

Bronx was throwing up quietly into someone else's helmet.

"Your helmet now, Bronx," The woman from Company SI put Bronx's helmet on her head. "Jesus, your skull's big. What a waste of space."

Bronx laughed weakly and wiped his lips and chin clean.

"Step up, soldiers." The 2K finished his rounds and with some urgency, got the men and women to their feet and into their positions. "We have been chosen for a great mission—"

"We're going over first," Gordon mumbled under his breath.

"We will lead the assault. Praise be to God."

The 2K was afraid. And with good reason. The ground around them shook suddenly and the trench walls began to collapse, raining large chunks of dirt and root down on them.

"Praise be to God," the 144K repeated.

Then the 2K held his revolver over his head and launched himself up a ladder and over the top of the trench. Gordon followed; they all followed as they were trained to do.

For a moment, everything was like silence. There was a noiseless rush of movement all around Gordon and before him was the beast. Seven great horned heads, one was a bear's, one a leopard's, one a lion's.

And one was a bright-eyed, pink-cheeked kid's, like a Bob's Big Boy sign come hideously to life.

Then the ground bounced and broke underneath him and the air grew hot with gunfire and the breath of the beast and Gordon shot into the sky, singing a new song that no man could learn but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth.

THE END

BEYOND SHAMMUA

L.A. STORY HOUR

Earth - Miami, Florida - March 22, 2303

Am I going to be asked to spy, to protect, to kill ... or some creative combination of the three? Caleb wondered as he waited for his potential employer to arrive.

He pondered this as he took in the vast waters before him ... and his thoughts made him weary.

After so many space travels, he saw the body of water before him far differently than he did as a boy ... of course, that was long ago and a different ocean.

The sunset behind him sparkled color across the mild surf. The color only reached so far as the deep blue-purple of twilight crept forward from the horizon and blanketed the daylight. This evening, the water's surface was ruffled like a young girl's birthday party dress. The ruffled waves rushed against the pier supports sending salty-scented spray to lightly shower him in a brush of glitter.

He had once thought of the ocean as being fathomless and frightening. The deep waters ripe with terrors and treasures just waiting to be given into his hand but, his childhood perception had been almost completely blotted out by the shadow cast from his adult travels.

Traveling the three universes of The Trihedron had dazzled him with both wonders and horrors that paled the ocean's power—evaporating it down to the size of a salty puddle.

A shift of sound drifted up from behind him, barely a whisper above the surf and the call of water fowl, but Caleb missed very little. Too many years as a mercenary and situations where "missing something" could bring an enemy too close—close enough to have the advantage. He knew whose footfall now walked the 300 yards of the pier to come up short behind him as if waiting for permission to get closer.

After a few moments he greeted Etienne Marcelle without turning around. "You're late, Marcelle."

Marcelle came to stand beside him. The sound of his heavy breathing almost overpowered the surf's endless symphony. "Caleb O'Shea. It is good to meet you in person. You're a difficult man to contact."

Marcelle was red-faced and did not look pleased with the effort he had made to arrive at Caleb's suggested meeting place.

Caleb favored the older man with a slow smile. "Would you have expected anything else?"

Marcelle chuckled. He hid his true feelings well, but Caleb had "talents," and he sensed the pearlesque shimmers of fear and anger humming just beneath Marcelle's surface calm. He made a mental note never to challenge Marcelle to a card game.

"So," Caleb continued, his dark eyes narrowing, "you, the World Minister of Defense, have searched me out to be a spy for you—to follow these warriors that you claim

are an undeclared species, all the way to Shammua in the Third Universe to prove it."

Marcelle nodded, his jowls quivering. "Yes, but you will actually follow the warriors *beyond* Shammua. That's where the other two spies tracked Attila."

"Nothing exists beyond the reaches of Shammua," said Caleb. "It is the last habitable planet in The Trihedron."

"That is what is believed ... yes," Marcelle agreed. "But these beings travel beyond Shammua and disappear. I say they have to be going *somewhere*."

"Why has no one questioned the existence of these warrior beings before?"

Marcelle gave an elegant shrug. "Probably because they're human—at least they *look* human. I'm hoping you'll be able to answer that when you see one of them, but these warriors are powerful. This same quest proved fatal to the first spy I hired and destroyed the sanity of the second."

Caleb felt a desperate urgency, almost an *eagerness*, coming off Marcelle like an odor. "Why is this mission so important to you?"

"This mission could be important to all of us, but my reasons are personal. Let's just say ... I'm testing a theory."

Caleb assessed this information—checked its taste for any trace of the synthetic—and would have spat.

Marcelle's desperate thoughts gave him away. Caleb leveled a knowing smile at him, which was rewarded by a suspicious scowl. Marcelle was unused to being "read."

"You believe you know where those warrior beings are going," Caleb said.

Marcelle inclined his head slightly. A reluctant affirmative, Caleb's talents noted.

"Care to let me in on your theory?" Caleb ventured.

Marcelle emitted an incredulous laugh at Caleb's boldness.

"I don't want to influence your findings."

Marcelle's eyes narrowed as he waited for Caleb to argue and push the issue, as Caleb guessed the first two spies had done. Presently, another of Marcelle's thoughts slipped over to Caleb. *He is intuitive and controls his own curiosity—even when he doesn't like it. I'm impressed.*

Caleb allowed Marcelle to see his smirk. Marcelle's scowl, which seemed to have become permanent, deepened. Caleb knew precisely when Marcelle's heart began to dance a lively jig—a glorious dawn of awakening.

Yet, Marcelle showed no outward sign of his realization. No, absolutely no card games with Marcelle's perfected *poker face*. Caleb thought.

Instead, Marcelle simply said, "Mind reading is considered a form of rape, you know. It is punishable by law on two planets."

"Not on this planet," said Caleb, "and I 'read' when I choose to, but you already knew that. You've been studying me."

"I know about your unique 'talents' or I wouldn't have summoned you."

Caleb allowed Marcelle to feel the full impact of his stare. "I don't perform parlor tricks for pay like a circus animal to prove what I can do. These days, most would say such powers are a myth and science is the only mystery."

The powerful politician glanced around. Caleb wondered what he was looking for, and then realized Marcelle was concerned he might be recognized.

"Let's move this conversation elsewhere, shall we?" Marcelle suggested.

They headed for a nearby tavern called "Gaddi's Haven." As they walked, Marcelle struggled to keep up with Caleb's longer, stronger stride. Marcelle huffed heavily but refused to fall behind.

Caleb caught a glimpse of the two of them in a storefront window as they trekked up the sidewalk after leaving the pier. In Marcelle he saw a heavy-set politician in his mid-sixties, with a gleaming, shaved head and a contemporary male's loose-fitting mode of dress. Even red-faced and obviously irritated, Marcelle suited this sterile and modern era in Earth's history, Caleb decided.

Caleb knew he must look like a throwback by comparison. He wore his dark hair long and held back by a leather thong. Conscious of his own appearance, Caleb reached up to stroke his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee—he was not inclined to shave his facial and body hair for the sake of fashion.

His clothes did not match the times, either. The sturdy-looking garments fit him well, as did the worn leather boots: they were combat-ready. Fashion was never a factor.

As they traveled the sidewalk of the warm, sunset-washed city, Caleb noted a large number of alien species milling about among the humans here in this corner of the city. Far more of a mix than was generally tolerated on Earth. It was one of the reasons Caleb loved Miami.

A group of three Sethurians chatted with one another as they rambled toward Caleb and Marcelle. A gregarious species, most of them chose to appear as human when out and about, but their strange, flexible movements often gave them away. The three patted their pockets down in impossible ways, using boneless twists of their pale limbs, as they came toward him. He recognized the multi-universal sign of searching. When the trio drew close enough to pass, he detected the sharp scent of the sea—they had been swimming.

One member of the group—appearing as a male—extended an open, unlined palm out to Caleb. "Master, do you have some currency for a public confercom? I don't have the requirement, and I need to make a call."

Caleb glanced down at the Sethurian's hand then back up to his eyes—scared, desperate eyes. *He's worried. His friend didn't show up today.* Caleb clenched his jaw. "No, I can't help you."

The alien's shoulders drooped. "Oh ... Okay, I understand ..." He trailed off with his friends.

Marcelle murmured under his breath, "Freeloader."

Caleb clenched a fist to match his jaw. *Why didn't I help him? I had the currency and I sensed his desperation ... Why?* The question echoed in his mind unanswered as Caleb covered the doubt, putting it to bed beneath the callused quilt he had made long ago.

As they arrived inside Gaddi's Haven, Caleb and Marcelle were swaddled in comforting dimness and the wafting odor of spirits—both past and present. They settled into a couple of tall-backed, cushioned chairs at a table in the back corner. The location gave Caleb a view of nearly every point of the tavern—and it kept his back to a wall.

The tavern was filled with the low, burbling music of voices set to the percussion of clinking glass. The noisier, evening crowd had yet to arrive.

A waitress approached their table. She glided with the signature grace of her species. Marcelle, Caleb read, thought the female was from Sethur.

Caleb said aloud, "She's Paltian."

This drew a stunned glance from Marcelle and a wide smile from the female.

"That is correct, master," she said. "I am from Palti. How did you know?"

Caleb flashed a smile. He liked her. "I've made it a point to know where all the beautiful mares are from."

"Oh, that's right," Marcelle said as he slapped the tabletop. "Palti inhabitants refer to their females as 'mares.' What was the term for the males? Studs? Stallions?"

"Bandits," the waitress answered. "The males are called 'bandits.'"

Caleb and the waitress smiled at one another. "Roughly translated, of course," he added.

"What can I get for you," the mare asked Marcelle, politely.

Marcelle ordered a glass of wine.

She turned her attention to Caleb. "And what can I get for you, master?"

The mare's rough voice made him wince. It was at odds with her lithe grace. Her flawless skin was black as tar. Elliptical pupils sliced her blue eyes and her plum-colored hair glistened in the dim lights.

"A beer, please, mistress."

"Draft," she intuited as she gazed at him. "I like a renaissance bandit."

For a moment, her eyes met Caleb's and he caught the drift of her thoughts. His smile turned into a grin as she walked away. He settled further back into his chair and enjoyed view.

"Interspecies relationships are frowned upon here on Earth," Marcelle cautioned when the waitress was out of hearing distance.

Caleb's smile evaporated. "I wouldn't have thought you were a bigot."

"I'm not," Marcelle protested. "I was just warning you. I'm in a public position. I have to be careful. Humans can be cruel."

"I know for a fact that if I were to touch that Paltian mare's skin, it would feel soft and warm as any human female," said Caleb. "Palti mares have their talents."

Within the tavern's dimly lit interior, Caleb felt more at home. He had traveled all over The Trihedron and found an eerie similarity among the species. All seemed to need places like Gaddi's to gather and forget their troubles.

Wherever Caleb traveled in The Trihedron, he always felt at home in places like Gaddi's, where thieves were thieves, whores were whores, drunks were drunks and most everything made sense and was just what it appeared to be. Caleb found a comforting sense of order within these dim places.

A live band warming up on a small stage across the room drew Caleb's attention. It was impossible to tell what they would play as the players were a mix of species from all across The Trihedron. The main selections would probably be Schwaadian. (Schwaad was a continent of the planet Nahbi in the Second Universe. Schwaad's inhabitants included a species known for their beautiful music. A distinctive mix of primitive percussion and highly complex melodies formed the Schwaadian sound—extremely popular across The Trihedron these days.)

Conjecture about the band had so engrossed Caleb, that he did not realize the shift in Marcelle's disposition.

"O'Shea, I must know ... is it true you possess the powers of a Healer?"

Caleb's eyes snapped to Marcelle's face.

Marcelle leaned forward and Caleb felt urgency wafting from Marcelle's mind like wispy threads of black smoke.

Caleb went very still. He had not heard the term, "Healer," in many, many years. An old anger, and an old pain, rose within him with the force of floodwaters.

How could Marcelle know of Healers? How?

If Marcelle noticed any sign of the dangerous anger swelling within Caleb, he gave no outward indication. Instead he continued, "I know a great many things about you, O'Shea. A few of those 'things' may surprise you."

Caleb kept his expression and his voice carefully neutral. "Such as ..."

"Such as' the fact that you're a Crier—a Seer—or to use a more ancient term, 'prophet.' You are a direct descendent of holy warriors of immense power. There are also 'Healers' in your bloodline—ones who could heal afflictions, physical, emotional or spiritual, with a touch or an embrace. There is much legend surrounding your family."

Other than his older sister Ruth, Caleb never acknowledged any other family. After his parents had been killed in a public transport tragedy while they were traveling The Trihedron, he had kept his lineage secret.

The dam broke under the weight of the water. Old memories—old pain—became hidden, dangerous debris within the floodwaters that washed over Caleb. He had been fourteen at the time of his parents' death. He and Ruth were put into the care of a family friend.

"Your family retains a powerful reputation in the religious world. You would know that, O'Shea, if you ever bothered to speak of your family to anyone."

Marcelle leaned back into his chair and lifted his wine glass for a sip. Then he casually swirled the contents as he continued, "It is understandable, I suppose, that you would be reluctant to admit having any sort of psychic power—especially if it were reputed to be a 'gift' from God to your bloodline. That would be a tough sell in our faithless world."

Caleb did not trust himself to respond. He had the notion that if he spoke he would either reveal too much or physically attack Marcelle for ripping open old wounds.

Marcelle put down his wine glass and again regarded Caleb. "Your ancestor, Daniel Waldron, was both a Healer and a Crier—the greatest who ever lived—I'm told," Marcelle said.

Finally, Caleb found his voice, thick with bitterness.

"You forgot to mention he was eventually killed for it. The consensus these days, among the general population, is that my ancestor was a charlatan—among those who even remember who he was. And mystical nonsense, like the stuff you're spouting is widely regarded as just that ... nonsense."

The mildly triumphant smile that spread across Marcelle's face annoyed Caleb.

"Yes, O'Shea, you've run far from your roots, haven't you? Are you afraid you'll meet the same end? Murdered like Daniel and then disgraced as if your life never mattered?"

"I won't end up like Daniel Waldron," Caleb answered.

"You still have not answered my question. Do *you* possess the powers of a Healer?"

"Yes." Caleb offered no elaboration. Instead, the implications formed into a dancing, cackling specter suspended between them.

Caleb's anger abated as he watched the blood drain from Marcelle's face. The satisfaction of knowing he had frightened the politician soothed him. Despite Marcelle's confidence, Caleb sensed the man had not been fully prepared for the truth. The truth, in this case, challenged everything believed on Earth these days.

Caleb regained his composure and focused his dark gaze on Marcelle. He wanted the politician to hear and understand what he said.

"I don't know how you acquired this knowledge of my family, but heed my warning, Marcelle: if you repeat this information to anyone else, or attempt to exploit me with it, I will kill you."

Marcelle looked rattled ... and he resented it, Caleb knew. Marcelle's face had paled to pasty gray.

"There is no need for threats, O'Shea. I only sought the truth because something happened to second spy I hired. It was for this reason, I began to look for someone of your 'talents.' I now know it will take more than modern technology to track these beings."

Although he could easily "read" the minds of others, he rarely delved past surface thoughts. It was true that

mind reading was considered a form of rape—and nonconsensual mind-reading was a punishable offense. For Caleb, “reading” was sometimes his sole method of protection against an enemy. Otherwise, he refused to read past the trivial, surface thoughts of those who were not a threat to him.

Now, as he sensed a threat, Caleb allowed his power to expand and reach forward into Etienne Marcelle's mind. And what he saw shook him.

“You think these beings are planning an assault on the other planets in The Trihedron,” Caleb said, softly. “You’re looking for proof of that. You want to stop them before they conquer us all and establish a New Order in the three universes of The Trihedron.”

Caleb sensed an unbalanced intelligence and logic in Marcelle's thought processes. There was destruction in Marcelle's mind—a lust for it ... as well as for power.

Suddenly Caleb was squeezed out of Marcelle's mind. He realized belatedly that Marcelle had not only known of his mind reading abilities ... he had prepared to defend himself against them. More reason for apprehension. What was Marcelle hiding?

The evening crowd around the two men had grown considerably. The band finished their warm-up and began to play “Blues,” surprising Caleb.

“If these beings are planning an assault, we need to be prepared,” said Marcelle. “No one species has the right to rule another.” (His voice could barely be heard above the noise of the crowd and the music.) “This mission is important ... to all of us.”

Caleb still could not penetrate Marcelle's secret, but he knew he would have to accept the mission—especially if what Marcelle said was even partly true. Caleb felt scant responsibility toward the rest of his species, but he did care what happened to his sister and her children.

Any doubts Caleb might have had as to whether he would accept the mission dissolved a few moments later when a very large male walked into Gaddi's Haven. Even before Marcelle saw the male and pointed him out ... Caleb would have known, somehow...

Attila had come to call.

Caleb immediately noted Marcelle's past descriptions of Attila hardly did justice to the male's size.

Caleb watched the warrior move smoothly through the crowd. He estimated Attila's height to be over seven feet. Even though thickly muscled, Attila moved with the eerie grace of a Paltian.

“It would not do well for me to be seen with you. Good luck, O'Shea. If you're successful, the terms of our agreement are more than fair. You might even be able to retire,” Marcelle noted as he rose to leave. “You have my code for the confercom. I expect regular updates.”

As Marcelle left, Caleb returned his attention to Attila.

Attila looked like a Roman statue come to life. Centuries ago, before the discovery of other sentient species, the warrior would have passed for human—a curiously large human.

However, that was long ago and Caleb knew enough about his own species, as well as others, to know the warrior was not human ... even though he could not specifically name what it was that made him so certain.

Attila settled onto a stool at the bar. The warrior appeared to be near Caleb's age, somewhere around the late thirties or early forties. Beautiful in its angular perfection, the male's face turned many female heads, as did his short-cropped golden hair and intense, blue gaze.

Caleb pulled further back into his chair as Attila's eyes searched the tavern.

He felt the warrior's powerful presence—felt it from the moment the male entered the tavern. He considered “reading” the warrior, but he had learned long ago there were a few rare species who could “feel” their minds being read. Something about the nature of Attila's energy gave Caleb pause and this same intuition sent off warning signals that he would be in a singular sort of peril if the warrior learned of his existence.

Caleb considered how strongly he sensed the alien's presence and knew Attila possibly sensed the same from him. *What have I gotten myself into?* Hiding in the shadows of his corner, Caleb curled his considerable power into himself and hopefully out of reach of the warrior's know.

Caleb nursed a third beer while another warrior entered the bar. Almost as large as Attila, he had dark hair, but several ridged, uneven scars marred the perfection of this one's features. He also radiated a powerful energy. Upon spotting Attila, he moved toward him with a smile of recognition. The two embraced like two old friends. They moved to a table off to one side of the bar. From all appearances, it seemed the two were old buddies exchanging tales—possibly from on and off the battlefield.

Caleb let out a frustrated sigh. As much as he wanted to observe Attila and his comrade, the combined energy of the two warriors suffocated him as he fought to rein in his own energy signal... the effort had become a strain. Caleb began to tremble and break out in a light sweat. The waitress glided back to the table and noticed his discomfort.

“Are you alright, master?” Is there anything I can do,” queried the mare, with concern.

Caleb's voice had become nearly as rough as the mare's. “No, mistress. I just need to get home. I'm not feeling well. I would like to settle up my tab.”

After paying his bill, Caleb asked the mare to assist him to the door. He needed energy to leave Gaddi's Haven unobtrusively. Loathing himself for what he had to do, Caleb drew *Whirlen* (metabolic energy) from the mare to use toward the considerable stamina needed to maintain his mask until he was outside. Fortunately, she was young and strong.

By the time Caleb and the waitress reached the sidewalk, she looked exhausted. She stumbled and would have fallen if Caleb had not caught and held her up.

“I'm sorry, master. I don't know what is wrong.”

An intense guilt stabbed at him as he forced an explanation, “It's all right, mistress. You're tired.” He

tipped her face up toward his, fighting the visions and emotions that transmitted themselves from her to him with the touch. "You need to get someone to cover your tables for an hour or so while you get a nap. Then, you will need to eat something. After that, you'll feel like yourself again."

He paused a moment to stare into her eyes and whisper, "Thank you for your help, mistress. You've been very kind." He lowered his face closer, like a lover, and softly kissed her mouth. She responded with a gentle sigh. She did not react when he dropped currency into her pocket, more than enough to cover the time lost for a nap.

When he released the mare, she drifted away from him with a smile and returned to Gaddi's. Her normal grace replaced by a weary shuffle. The sight tugged at Caleb's conscience with regret's unique pull.

Moments later, he began to feel better—stronger and he crossed the street. The mare's energy fortified him some, but dropping his energy mask provided the biggest relief.

Night had fallen while he had been in Gaddi's Haven. He had trekked about a block, in and out of streetlights, when a dirty hand suddenly grasped at his arm, only to be pulled back like a flash of silver in a murky pond. As Caleb turned, an old human man, dressed in filthy rags, stepped out of the shadows of an alley.

"Can you spare a bit of currency for a starving old man?"

Poverty was unheard of on Earth. Caleb decided the male had to be a con artist.

"Get away from me, old one," he said, and turned to leave.

A gaggle of humans and aliens, passing by on the sidewalk, gave the old one a wide berth. Some covered their faces to keep from gagging.

Again, the old one touched Caleb's arm. The physical contact transferred to Caleb the extent old man's misery and hunger. Tears welled up in Caleb's eyes; his mouth became dry and his belly knotted in hunger.

Caleb hated it—this power—hated it! He cursed his bloodline as he grabbed his stomach.

The old man reached out again, but Caleb pushed his hand away, careful to touch rags and not flesh. The old man sprang back, grabbed Caleb by the arm and pulled him into the alley.

Physically, the old man should not have been a match for him, but Caleb discovered he was fighting the old man's stench, as much as his unexpected strength, and the two of them fell to the gritty pavement. The old one met Caleb's practiced blows with an equal power, and Caleb quickly found himself pinned beneath the old man.

The old one's eyes gleamed with a lambent glow in the black shadows of the alley. He straddled Caleb's hips, grabbed him by the throat and leaned close to Caleb's face—like a lover—as Caleb had done to the Paltian mare just a short time before.

Caleb's eyes watered at the stench as the old man spoke. "The truth is right in front of you, Caleb O'Shea, but you haven't been paying attention."

Caleb froze at the sound of his own name. *What was this madness?*

The old man continued, "You will be made to listen ... and you will make the people listen or you'll all be destroyed as you deserved to be a long time ago."

The hand on Caleb's throat tightened and his vision became dim and grainy. As Caleb choked, his mouth began to gulp like a fish out of water.

"It's time to wake you up. I'm going to make you feel what you're so afraid to feel, Healer.... Crier," the old man whispered. "Wake up, Healer your time has come and you can hide no longer."

The whisper faded. The old one's sneering face and glowing eyes faded as Caleb descended into a vision somewhere between life and death...

... Caleb stood in a dusty field watching the dirty, ragged old man work the land beneath an ancient sky in a hot sun's glare.

My name was Ashur. The old man's voice skidded against the grain of Caleb's mind. With a breath-stealing jolt, Ashur's life began to flow before Caleb in a river of images.

Miserable, hungry and without hope, Ashur was an old man from the moment of his birth on a dirty mat in a tent ... Caleb's insides twisted as Ashur was forced to perform difficult tasks from the time he could walk. At the age of seven, Ashur had been taken by his father to work the land.

He was a slave! A slave! Caleb realized.

Mind-numbing monotony in the same fields everyday of Ashur's life. He took a wife to soothe him but, desperate couplings on the same dirty mat of his birth, only produced starving children. Ashur died hungry and helpless in the fields he worked. Death's stealthy, bleak chill stole over Caleb as dirt was shoveled over Ashur's unmarked grave. Such suffering seemed so pointless. The weight of Ashur's misery crushed Caleb. His chest ached beneath it...

... then there was the old man's voice again, foul breath and glowing eyes, "Wake up Healer. You can't stop the destruction if you've amputated your power. Wake up Crier ... you can't meet your destiny if you continue to deny your past ... Wake up!"

Caleb came to and was relieved to find he was alone. He sat up, drew his knees to his chest and allowed the tears to come. Why had he denied his heritage? The old man managed to violate him, something which Caleb would have thought impossible. Caleb had used his intense, psychic prowess over the years to hide from his own birthright—his legacy—and block the visions he received through touch.

A supernatural empathy was among the powers of a Healer. Caleb had been convinced he would have been torn apart by all the pain and misery in the universes and did not know how his ancestors withstood the anguish of their gifts, even if they were capable of alleviating part of the anguish with their healing powers. He had not used his own healing powers in a very long time.

He rose from the dirty pavement and dusted himself off. Distracted, he did not sense the figure nearby until a sudden movement caught his attention. He instinctively pressed himself against the rough surface of the nearest wall and looked toward the sidewalk—Attila was staring into the blackness of the alley. Caleb reined in his energy and held his breath. A bead of sweat rolled into his eye and stung him, but he did not blink until the warrior turned away and left.

Caleb moved to the end of the alley and looked northward up the sidewalk in time to see the warrior turn right—toward the beach. Caleb followed at a discreet distance and watched Attila procure a hover cab.

As the cab pulled away from the curb, Caleb used his wristband, standard military issue, to dial-up Paula Weir, who worked at the Florida Department of Transportation. He called her at home because the FDOT's official channels would not approve what he needed. Paula did not fail when he requested a trace on Attila's hover cab. Caleb climbed into his own hovercraft and traveled to the Miami-Dade Spaceport, where Paula reported the cab had stopped. He grabbed a bag, packed and ready to go, from off the floor of his hovercraft and went inside the spaceport.

He caught up with Attila as the warrior boarded a private space shuttle. Caleb looked around and spied a bank of outdated public confercoms. He used one to contact Marcelle. The older male's plump face appeared on the ancient, stained screen.

"I've followed Attila to the Miami-Dade Spaceport," Caleb said, without preamble. "He boarded a private space shuttle. I'll need a private spacecraft and a trace on Attila."

"Consider it done. Go to the ticket counter, give them my name and tell them what you need. I'll contact you when you're on board. Now ... I must ask ... What is your impression? Are they human?"

"No, they're not human."

"Just as I thought, this brings us to a couple of big questions: What are they and why haven't they declared themselves? We'll talk more once you've boarded the shuttle. At that time, I should have more information to give you regarding Attila's destination." Finished, Marcelle signed off.

The pre-launch check for the space shuttle took longer than it would have for an aircraft. Although anxious to get permission to take off, Caleb thoroughly checked his craft. The pre-launch routine settled him and allowed the pilot in him to quiet the mercenary frame of mind.

Caleb could pilot most any craft within each of the three universes, but the transition—or joining—point between the universes of The Trihedron, would require Public Transport or else he would never be able to keep up with Attila. He dreaded the idea of PT travel but would do it if he had to—it was the only way to move from one universe into another.

After the pre-launch check, Caleb knew a few impatient moments while waiting for Marcelle to call. Space Traffic Control would want a flight plan, but first

he needed to know where Attila was headed. The bridge's cramped quarters did not alleviate his impatience as he turned in the captain's chair and slammed his knee against an instrumentation consol pedestal. The craft's canned air made him hoarse.

Caleb growled as he stared at the confercom. "Damn it, Marcelle, where am I going?"

Almost on cue, the onboard confercom began to beep and Marcelle's face popped into view on the screen. "Okay, O'Shea. My sources tell me that, if Attila holds course, he is bound for Palti. So, thus far, he isn't leaving the Milky Way."

"I'll file a flight plan and call you again later," Caleb said, then abruptly ended the communication.

As he later rocketed free through the cold, black sea of space, Caleb found his sense of wonder returning. *This is the way to travel. Public Transport can take you to interesting places, but it's not as fun getting there traveling like this*, Caleb thought.

While he could pilot a craft and soar fully awake within each, individual, universe, PT travel required a two-month stasis as one entered The Nocturne Bias between the universes—the joining point. To explain the Nocturne Bias—humans are taught to summon the image of a large box divided into three sections with a large open passage at one end. The passage represents the Nocturne Bias and the three sections are the three universes of The Trihedron—one can travel freely within each universe but can't get to the next universe without entering the Nocturne Bias—a dangerous passage which requires a Public Transport ship. The technology used in PT's made travel within the Nocturne Bias possible. This technology had been a breakthrough of immense proportions and was brought by an alien species, the Nahbians.

Caleb's love of history kept his mind occupied as he programmed his course for Palti. He knew the discovery of Palti had preceded the Nahbians. Humans had learned they were not alone in the year 2184, when the planet Palti was found on the outer banks of the Milky Way—on the other side of a small sun.

In 2203, a spaceship bearing Nahbi representatives traveled through the Nocturne Bias into the Milky Way and humans and Paltians discovered theirs was not the only universe. Humans returned with the Nahbians to The Red Flower—the Second Universe—where two known inhabited planets exist, Nahbi and Sethur.

Scientists planned and began preparing an interplanetary effort for exploration of the outer reaches of The Red Flower. In 2223, two years later, they found evidence of a possible third universe. A representative of all known sentient species was on the spacecraft, *Galileo's Hope*, which traveled into the Third Universe for the first time.

What those pioneers found was a universe unknown and frightening, dark and vast. There was only one star—deep within—which served as the sun to a single habitable but uninhabited planet which the representatives named Shammua. Other than Shammua and its sun, the blackness was as complete as a grave and full of invisible dangers. This universe was named by the Nahbians.

They called it ... The Beyond.

The journey from the Miami spaceport to Palti took a month, giving Caleb ample time to report to Marcelle his impressions of Attila and his kind.

"Things must run through the proper channels. I'm going to speak of this to the World Minister of The United Militia, General Cara Shentook," said Marcelle. "She will take it before the United States President, who will then consult the United World President."

Caleb's natural intuition detected the greedy anticipation in Marcelle's voice. "Don't you think you're being premature?" He asked. "We have no evidence that they intend to harm anyone."

"They're 'warriors,' aren't, they?" Marcelle threw back. "This process must be started, O'Shea. If I wait too long, and they mean us harm, a delay could cost lives."

"Yes, these beings are definitely warriors," Caleb said. "But, being a warrior does not necessarily mean one is prone to initiate war. It generally means one would be a formidable enemy in battle."

By the time he landed at Palti's spaceport in the city of Igal, Caleb developed an even stronger desire to understand Marcelle's agenda.

In the early noon hours Caleb tracked Attila around Igal. The errands the warrior attended seemed random—he picked up supplies at various locations and took them back to his shuttle, but did not stop to seek lodging.

At nightfall, Caleb followed Attila to a tavern called *Noshama*. Caleb took a deep breath, curled his power into himself and went inside.

Noshama was a rowdy place that was permeated with the scent of Paltian beer—a similar, yeasty aroma to Earth beer, but much heavier. It was filled with of drunken Paltian bandits from a nearby mine. The bandits were dressed in simple trousers and shirts made from coarsely woven, cheap burlap-like material. The tavern was low-tech and Caleb found a rough-hewn, wooden bench in a dark corner and sat down.

Attila chose a round table where he sat and nursed a mug of beer until three others of his kind joined him. The warriors enthusiastically greeted one another before settling into their seats. Caleb observed that the three arrivals were dressed in the ornate manner of socially elite Paltians—white trousers embroidered with gold and glistening, vibrantly-colored robes made from *throst*, (a Paltian material which rippled and shimmered—a cross between silk and satin) and emanated the same powerful energy as Anak.

A thought occurred to Caleb as he recalled that the warrior who met Attila at Gaddi's Haven had been attired in a manner which would have been fashionable in Miami. Attila was the only one whose manner of dress was as practical and innocuous as Caleb's. This led Caleb to wonder about his perception. He decided to test his newborn theory as a waitress approached.

The mare's smooth, black skin, glistening golden hair and sparkling green eyes, reminded Caleb of a cat he had loved as a child.

"What can I get for you, master," she asked. "Wine, beer, hooch or coffee—*Sulawesi* blend?"

"A beer, please, mistress." He paused a moment, with a glance toward Anak, then asked, "Could you answer a question for me? Have you seen that male in here before? The one dressed as I am?"

The mare looked in the direction Caleb indicated. "Yes, of course. That's Anak. He comes here to visit his brothers, Ahimam, Sheshai and Talmi."

"His name is Anak?" It pleased Caleb that he had already accomplished more than the other two spies by discovering the warrior's name. "Tell me, mistress, of what species is Master Anak?"

The young mare laughed, an even more unattractive sound than her voice. "You have such beautiful eyes, bandit, to be so blind. Can you not plainly tell that Anak and his brothers are Paltian?"

Caleb's eyes snapped back to Anak.

He delved into the mare's mind, to see the warriors through her eyes, and saw Anak and the other three as Paltian males ... albeit, unusually large Paltian males. When he returned to his own perception, he saw them as he always had—human. *What are these beings? What am I dealing with?* Even the strange, shape-shifting Sethurians could not accomplish a subjective image.

He watched the four warriors, over the top of his mug, as they laughed and talked, but there were moments when they became very quiet for long periods. He wondered if they reminisced ... or plotted. The three the mare had called Ahimam, Sheshai and Talmi left after a while. Anak sat alone at the table for only a moment then rose and headed for the back of the tavern.

Caleb followed at a prudent distance, although he had begun to feel weak from the strain of harnessing his power for so long. He followed the giant warrior through a series of hallways, which led to a large storage area. Anak stepped behind a large container and was hidden from Caleb's view.

Caleb felt Anak's energy diminish and disappear and he crept forward and peered around the container. An unpleasantness wrapped itself around him like a wooly, wet blanket.

The corner where Anak had been was a dead end and Anak had vanished.

In disbelief, Caleb stood and stared at the area as he slowly released the hold he had on his power. He waited for the voice of the female he knew had come up behind him, "He'll be back tomorrow night."

Caleb turned to see the voice's owner, a human female with long, curly black hair and soulful brown eyes. Lovely and young, she appeared to be somewhere around twenty-five. Caleb sensed a wise and wary essence about her. Humans used to call it *street smarts*. "How do you know he'll be back?"

"Because he always comes back a second night."

"How did you know I was looking for him?"

"I saw you follow him." A dubious expression and an alluring dimple punctuated her teasing little half smile. "You mean you weren't looking for him?"

Caleb could not suppress an answering smile.

"I was wondering where you got off to ..." ground out a male who appeared behind her. He spoke in Paltian, but Caleb had no trouble understanding him—another talent of a Healer. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Nothing, Teren." She shrugged casually and used a graceful hand to indicate Caleb. "I was just standing here talking to this bandit."

The one called "Teren" turned to assess Caleb. The male was older than Caleb and, at first, Caleb thought Teren was human but his eyes told a different story—crystal green, with elliptical pupils. The eyes, combined with eerily graceful movements, marked Teren as half-Paltian. Teren sneered at him. "This is no 'bandit,' this is a *man*," Teren used "man" like a filthy epithet. He turned back to the woman. "You're not making any money standing here talking to him. There is a barroom full of Palti bandits who would love to taste the charms of a human female ... are you too good to bed a Paltian now that there is a human around?"

She blushed deeply and lowered her eyes. The dimple disappeared and Caleb realized she had not wanted him to know she was a prostitute. Suddenly, he wanted to see that dimple again.

"How much for her?" Caleb asked.

Teren's demeanor changed. Caleb had just spoken Teren's true language.

"For how long? One hour? Two?"

"No, I want her for the whole night."

Caleb watched her as he and Teren worked out the price. He paid Teren, who then drew the young woman forward and pressed her up against Caleb. She allowed it, but put her hands against his chest to alleviate some of the intimacy.

"She's your tonight, human. Enjoy."

After Teren left, Caleb stepped back and took her hand. "What is your name, mistress?"

"Isabelle."

He tipped her face up toward him. "Just ... 'Isabelle?'"

She smiled. "Isabelle Rueben, master."

"My name is Caleb O'Shea," he said. "I'm afraid I don't have a room, Isabelle. I've only just arrived on Palti."

"I could rent us a room, but..." her voice trailed off and a thoughtful frown puckered her brow for a moment before she suggested, "I think you would be more comfortable at my house."

A five-minute hover cab ride took them to her home—a cottage-like dwelling that was filled with the sweet, lingering ghost of incense. Isabelle told Caleb to make himself comfortable in a small parlor off the entry. She returned a few minutes later wearing a deep, crimson robe, made of a heavy fabric, and trimmed with gold piping. She brought him a drink and poured one for herself.

Caleb did not have to look into her mind to know she had never brought another "client" into her house when, with a jerky wave, she indicated Caleb should follow her down the hall to her bedroom—an unusually timid invitation for a seasoned prostitute.

In her bedroom, Caleb saw pictures everywhere of what he assumed to be her family. He studied one particular image of a beautiful smiling woman who bore a strong resemblance to Isabelle.

"That's my mother," Isabelle said. She pointed out other pictures. "That's my brother and my father. My family was killed not long after we moved to Palti. My father was a missionary. The Paltians already have a holy book ... some didn't take kindly to my father's beliefs. I survived because I was not home at the time. That was eight years ago."

"Why didn't you return to Earth?"

Isabelle sighed. "No other family ... and no money," There was an air of resigned despair about her that pressed upon Caleb's heart. She gracefully sat down on the edge of the bed.

Caleb scanned her mind and was stunned by what she had endured. Her spirit hung by a fragile filament and this tore at him. She was tough but fragile - quite an anomaly. He knew she had seen precious little tenderness in the last eight years and could not take this kind of life much longer.

When Caleb did not join her on the bed, she rose and came to him. Taking his left arm, Isabelle worked at the straps securing his ever-present wristband, removed it and laid it on a nearby drawer chest. The same chest held the room's only lamp, which cast them both in a soft, golden light. Isabelle's gentle ministrations reminded him that he had not known much tenderness, either.

She tugged his tunic free where it tucked into his breeches. He raised his arms when she lifted the garment up and he leaned down to allow her to pull it off over his head. A watchful stillness waited within him.

Isabelle seemed pleased with what she saw as she gazed at him, even though his chest and back bore many scars. She trailed her fingers over the puckered and discolored flesh. With a touch as light as feather ticking. She followed each touch with a kiss. He stood very still under her gentle touch but his heart began to beat faster, fighting the stillness.

Caleb had not intended to bed the young woman and felt a reluctance to use her for his own needs. He had paid for her services because something about her tugged at his heart. "Isabelle, you're an angel, but are you sure you want to do this?"

When she raised her face to look up into his eyes, the shimmer of her tears shook him. "I'll want nothing else again in my life but this."

Caleb's self-induced stillness cracked like water-damaged plaster and began to crumble away. His desire overwhelmed him and he responded. He took Isabelle into his arms, regardless of what he would see, and lowered his mouth to hers. He kissed her deeply and fought the pain and self-loathing she carried. However, soon her pain threatened to swallow him whole and he

broke away to the sound of her frustrated cry of protest ringing in his ears. The intense pain haunting her eyes told him she had misunderstood.

"I'm so sorry," she exclaimed. "I should have known a man like you would never want someone like me!"

She attempted to run from the room, but Caleb caught her around the waist. The violent fight she put up surprised him. She fought him hard as he dragged her to the bed.

"Listen, Isabelle.... I can help you ... let me help you. This thing between us can go no further unless you let me help you," he explained when she calmed enough to listen. They knelt on the bed.

Through tears, she asked, "How can you help me, Caleb?"

"I can heal you," He whispered. He chose not to consider the implications of what he intended to do.

Before Isabelle put a voice to the confusion in her eyes, Caleb pulled her close and began speaking to a being he had not spoken to in many years. He gasped as he immediately felt his powers expand and draw out Isabelle's crippling emotional pain. Her burden gathered within him—shattered girlhood dreams, unspeakable grief, paralyzing fear, weakness, despair, violation and self-loathing—he groaned and trembled as he bore the weight of it.

Tears spilled from his eyes, ran down his face and anointed Isabelle's black curls where his chin rested on top of her head. She kept her face buried against his bare chest. Her arms held him fast and kept him from falling as he reeled from the onslaught of power and pain. It seemed an eternity before the burden lifted from him. But it was taken—evaporated like a toxic steam.

After a few moments, Isabelle drew back to look at him. A new-peace settled over her—as a tranquility in her eyes. Dizzy but purged, Caleb's limbs trembled from the massive power surge that had caused his body to tense like a bow. He could feel the questions in her dark eyes as she searched his face.

"I am Caleb O'Shea. I am descended from Sage Waldron and his son, Daniel. I'm a Healer and a Crier—but I had forgotten what that meant, until now."

"Then I believe we have helped *each other*," Isabelle said with a gentle smile—Caleb enjoyed a tantalizing glimpse of dimple.

The sudden grip of sheer need surprised him. "The night is still new and I believe there is more I could do for you, mistress."

He lowered his head to kiss her—to drink from the fountain. He could not stop the soft moan that escaped him at the first touch of her lips. He knew he had finally come home. With one hand he cradled the back of her head and, with the other, he opened her robe and slipped his hand inside to stroke the warm satin of her skin.

Immediate and hungry, her response welcomed him. He read her as she opened herself completely, mentally and physically. Her desire equaled his and they held nothing back.

Finally spent by the first weak light of dawn, Caleb held Isabelle close while she slept and two certainties possessed him. The first came simply from his human heart. He knew he would never again want anyone but Isabelle. The second certainty resulted from his gift as a prophet. He knew Isabelle had conceived sometime during the night. Twins—a male and a female.

Within Caleb, the boy edged closer to the mercenary, and the man fell asleep with a smile.

* * *

Caleb awoke, alone in the bed, a few hours later. The full white light of a Palti morning filtered into the room from lightly shuttered windows.

"Isabelle?" Caleb called.

A deep, resonate male voice answered, "She went to the marketplace."

Caleb achieved a sitting position and full wakefulness simultaneously when he saw Anak sitting in a chair five feet away, watching him from the dimness. The light coming in through the shutters cast faint streaks of alternating shadow and light on his face.

"Good morning Caleb O'Shea. I thought it was time we met."

Caleb tensed. "What do you want, Anak?"

"You've learned my name. How clever of you. The first two spies couldn't do it," Anak said with a grin. Anak's grin disturbed Caleb more than the idea of his wrath.

He repeated, "What do you want?"

Anak transformed before Caleb's eyes into the old man, Ashur, who had attacked Caleb in Miami. "I've been sent to wake you up." He transformed back into himself again and added, "Call off Etienne Marcelle."

"Why?"

"Why' to what—waking you up or calling off Marcelle?"

Caleb shook his head, too many emotions cluttered his mind. "Both, I guess."

"You're the only one left of your kind ... at least until Isabelle gives birth to your children or unless you gift others with the powers of a Healer. As for Marcelle ... well, it doesn't matter because you'll do what you must do when the time comes."

Anak's vague answers stirred Caleb's anger and led to a series of rapid-fire questions. "What do you know of Isabelle or my children? What is it I'll do ... and why does all of this involve me at all?"

Anak's piercing, blue stare was as frightening and mesmerizing as a cobra's. "There are things happening here that you don't understand."

"Marcelle believes—"

Anak interrupted, "Marcelle believes that I and my kind are an undeclared species plotting to launch an assault of apocalyptic proportions."

"Is it true? What's really going on?"

"Yes and no. There's more to it all than that. Something far worse.... but you figure it out, Healer. That's what you're destined to do." Anak rose. "I'm going

to be much harder to follow from here on out. You'd better learn to stop being so timid with your power."

Before Caleb could comment, Anak disappeared. No sound or preamble—just gone.

Isabelle returned a short time later and Caleb bathed and dressed while she prepared a proper breakfast—the reason she had risen early and gone to the marketplace.

"You need to pack your belongings," Caleb announced at the end of their meal. "I am going to give you the funds to return to Earth on the next space shuttle flight."

They were sitting at a heavy, cut stone table in her tiny kitchen.

Isabelle looked stunned. "What about you? I want to travel with you."

"I'm up against some extremely dangerous enemies," Caleb explained. He waited a moment before adding, "And, the rest of my journey could take up to a year. You don't have that kind of time. Space travel isn't recommended for a female past her fifth month of pregnancy."

"Pregnancy? But, I'm not ..." her voice trailed off as she stared, wide-eyed at Caleb.

Afraid he had shocked her too much, he favored her with a reassuring smile. "Yes, Isabelle—Twins. A son and a daughter."

Her expression worked desperately as she absorbed what he said. "H ... How could you know, even before I do?"

"You remember what I told you last night?" Caleb continued at her slow nod, "I'm a Healer, but that's not my only gift. There are prophets in my bloodline. Most of them were street preachers, called 'Criers.' My ancestor, Daniel Waldron, was born a Healer and a Crier. No one else had such combined powers until I was born."

With something like awe, Isabelle repeated, "You're a Healer and a Crier."

"I am that ... but I am also something more." Caleb had never divulged the truth of his other powers to anyone until now, not even Ruth. During battle, he had discovered he possessed other, more frightening, powers.

"The Creator has great plans for you." Isabelle's soft words sounded ominous—even in a tiny kitchen illuminated by the full light of day.

"It is only wise that I should do as you ask," Isabelle said, after a few moments to consider. "But, I also have a request."

"You have only to name it."

Her eyes were naked as she looked at him. "Before I leave, make me your wife."

They were married two hours later.

That evening, after Caleb left the house to walk to Noshama, a terrible tension and dizziness nearly paralyzed him when human male brushed past him as he walked Igal's grimy streets. Even though he had not encountered one since his youth, he recognized the

menacing energy signature of an Adversary—a gifted follower of darkness.

Caleb followed the Adversary, who also headed toward the tavern, but just before the male reached the tavern, he was seized by Anak, Ahimam, Sheshai and Talmai and dragged behind the tavern, into Palti's never ending wilderness.

Caleb masked his energy and followed as closely as he dared. He knew he needed to keep the group within sight because sound did not travel well on Palti. Even at a distance of about ten yards, he could not hear a single sound coming from the group—though he could plainly see them. The captured Adversary strained and screamed, but the sound did not reach Caleb's ears. The warriors carried the captive to a clearing and proceeded to strip him.

Caleb crawled on his belly nearby in tall grass until close enough to hear what they were saying. At a distance of eight yards, Caleb could hear clearly enough to discern what the males were saying—even if it sounded muffled and warbled.

Talmai, Sheshai and Ahimam, held the naked Adversary down while Anak stood and interrogated him. "What are the Adversaries up to? You might as well confirm it, vermin, because we already know the Adversaries are looking for The Garden."

The male responded by spitting at Anak and screaming, "Damn you, Anak! Damn you all to Hell!"

The warriors laughed and the man continued to spit and rant. Anak reached his right hand out to the side and said a word, which Caleb did not catch, and an enormous battle sword appeared in Anak's hand. The sword's appearance caused an overpowering terror to sweep over Caleb ... he knew exactly what Anak was. Marcelle had been wrong—Humans identified Anak's species a long time ago.

"Stupid, insolent bastard. What Mentor gifted you with an Adversary's power? He ought to be killed for his monstrous bad taste." Anak looked down on the Adversary with disdain. "As if it were within *your* power to decide who goes to Hell."

Anak raised the sword and severed the Adversary's right leg at the knee with one powerful blow. The Adversary howled and writhed. Anak cauterized the wound with his bare hand. The enemy would not bleed out right away and the warriors could torture him until he was nothing more than a head and torso.

Trembling from fear and the effort of masking, Caleb crept away. The Adversary's terrible screams disappeared after a couple more yards of distance.

When Caleb returned home he found Isabelle sitting at the stone table reading a Bible.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you." He edged toward the bedroom but Isabelle's call halted him. She seemed to find his discomfort amusing.

"I study a little almost every evening." Her dark eyes probed him. "My father was a missionary, remember? You are a bold man, I think. You've been inside my bed,

my mind and my body. Why would you be so shy and uncomfortable to see me study this book?"

His parents had taught him Scripture from the time he was born, but he had not studied a Bible since the day his parents died. The thought of even touching a Bible made him feel like a hypocrite.

Isabelle pulled out a chair and Caleb hesitantly sat down next to her. She began to read aloud where she had left off. Caleb recognized the passage from the Old Testament book of Numbers—where the twelve spies had been sent to scout out the Promised Land before Israel was to enter it. As he listened to Isabelle read, something in the words made his face grow pale.

In a hoarse whisper, he said, "Let me see that."

She passed the book to his trembling hands. As he read, his breathing grew agitated. He looked up at Isabelle. "I know where Anak is going. I know where the Adversaries are going. No more following Anak, I need to go straight to Shammua."

Isabelle had picked up on his urgency. "Why? How do you know?"

"The names didn't mean anything separately but together ... Oh, God forgive me." Caleb put his hand to his temple. "There are no coincidences. I've been such a fool."

"What are you talking about?"

He pushed the book back toward her. "Read the names of the spies, Isabelle."

Isabelle found the passage and began to read the names: "Shammua, Shaphat, Caleb, Igal, Oshea, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi and Geuel." Tears coursed down her face when her eyes found his again.

"Ten of the spies came back and said the promised land was fruitful and desirable but giants lived there and there was no way they could conquer them and take it," Caleb produced the story from the annals of his dusty memory. "But, two of the spies had faith and said the job could be done."

Familiar with the story, Isabelle picked it up in a trembling voice, "The two spies with faith were Caleb and Oshea—called 'Hoshea' in some translations—

Oshea was the son of Nun. Moses called him Joshua."

Caleb's eyes were bright with unshed tears. "My middle name is Joshua. I am Caleb Joshua O'Shea."

The next morning, Caleb helped Isabelle pack her belongings, after contacting his sister. Ruth said she would help settle Isabelle, as he knew she would.

Before Caleb and Isabelle left for the spaceport, Teren turned up at the door, pushed past Caleb and stormed into the house. "Where is she? Where is my whore? I hear she didn't come to work last night!" Teren whirled on Caleb. "You, master, owe me for another night with my female!"

Caleb kept his voice level—a deceptive, dangerous calm. "I owe you nothing. Isabelle is not a whore and she does not belong to you."

Isabelle appeared out of the bedroom, holding a travel bag. As he took in the situation, Teren's nostrils flared wide with angry breaths. "You think you can just leave me?"

Caleb did not care for the tense, quiet rage within Teren's voice or the fact that Teren managed to put himself between Caleb and Isabelle.

"Watch me." Her dark eyes were fierce. "I'm leaving with Caleb. We were married yesterday morn."

Teren produced and engaged a laser knife. "I won't let you do that, Isabelle,"

Caleb felt a dark rage building when he saw the fear in Isabelle's eyes. He knew one swipe of the laser could sever steel. Before Teren could react, Caleb delivered a blow to his throat and dropped him to his knees. Even coughing and gasping, Teren wildly swiped at them with the knife. Caleb moved smoothly out of reach and Isabelle jumped back with a scream. Teren gained his feet and tried to come at her again and she bolted into the kitchen, putting the stone table between them.

Teren paid no heed to Caleb as he followed his single-minded course and Caleb summoned a destructive power. His breathing quickened, his hands involuntarily clenched into fists at his side and his jaw clenched with the energy that flooded in and seized him as Teren cut through the stone table with one swipe. Isabelle scrambled backward further with a horrified scream.

A grim expression compressed Caleb's mouth and Teren's knife-wielding hand suddenly jerked upward ... A look of terrified surprise came upon Teren's face—a second later, he severed his own head. Drained, Caleb fell to his knees, slick with sweat, just as Isabelle launched into a fit of shudders and terrified screams. After the screams calmed, he felt her arms around his shoulders. He looked up to see her wipe tears from knowing eyes. "Another talent?"

Caleb managed a nod. He did not try to explain his more dangerous powers—powers that frightened even him. He stood as he felt his strength returning. "Let's get you to the spaceport and away from this place."

A short time later, Caleb watched Isabelle board the space shuttle bound for Earth—Miami. After an emotional farewell, she asked Caleb what she could do to help him.

"Pray for me, Isabelle."

Caleb boarded a PT destined to dock at the spaceport in Ammiel, on the planet Nahbi. In Ammiel, Caleb's planned to board another PT bound for The Beyond—the Third Universe. The massive spaceship would then dock at Shaphat Interuniversal Spaceport on Shammua two months later.

Caleb overheard an argument on his way to the stasis decks.

"I want my stateroom! Master, were you not informed that I'm *not* to be put into stasis sleep? I'm *phobic*! This can't be happening ..." moaned an overweight, melodramatic Paltian mare, to a distraught PT steward.

Caleb chuckled to himself. *She's going to regret not being put into stasis sleep.* Most passengers aboard the PT's traveled in stasis chambers. The two-month trip was

rough with conditions caused by Nocturne Bias that challenged many constitutions. There were a few stasisphobes who had staterooms, relished misery and had a lot of time to kill. Usually, the very rich were the only ones who could afford to be phobic.

Regarding the PT's, the one comfort Caleb had found in his parents' death was that, in stasis sleep, they had never knew the ship drifted off course ... Into the path of an asteroid large enough to instantly kill all 5,000 souls on board.

He thought about that later as he fell into the deep void of stasis sleep for the two-month journey to The Red Flower—The Second Universe. He slept as he passed from The Milky Way and into The Red Flower—the universe with the mammoth red sun that cast everything in a reddish tint. Its literal status as a dying ember accounted for its color. Fortunately, the red sun was not expected to burn out completely for a couple of billion years.

Caleb spent a brief time awake in Ammiel.

The PT's were so massive their docks were separate from the main spaceport. Upon waking and being confirmed stable, Caleb and his fellow passengers were shuttled in hover buses to the main spaceport for access to the city or a connecting flight if needed.

During his brief time after disembarking the first PT, Caleb cautiously noted there were a much higher number of Adversaries around. He used much needed energy to mask himself and move through the crowd without Adversary detection.

However, even with his mask in place, one Adversary - a human male - harbored an unnerving interest in Caleb as he strolled passed him in the spaceport. The man was dark haired, his dark eyes danced with an unhealthy mischief, and he stopped and stared as Caleb walked by. He presented Caleb with a strangely triumphant grin, causing a frown to form along Caleb's brow. Caleb walked on but stopped after a few paces to turn and glance back. The Adversary was gone.

During his brief time in Ammiel, he also noted an alarming increase in military personnel. Such heavy military presence did not bode well in these peaceful regions. *I need to contact Marcelle—ASAP.*

Since Caleb knew Anak's ultimate destination was Shaphat, he had no need to remain in The Red Flower, and visit the planet Sethur or its famous twin cities of Geuel and Gaddiel, so he boarded the PT for Shaphat, on Shammua, in The Beyond.

Again, sleep. Somewhere in the middle of a stasis dream, Caleb's ship passed into The Beyond—the dark Third Universe. Out of the reach of Shammua's weak sun, the blackness seemed like a living creature. It pressed against the transport's windows as if clawing anxiously for an opening.

Technology had advanced enough to where a scan revealed Shammua and its sun were the only *visible* objects in The Beyond. Also revealed, was a mind-boggling vastness—and this was in an age that could actually measure the size of universes in decafathoms. Aside from the universe's inconceivable size, immense mystery lurked in The Beyond. One such mystery concerned *objects* in the blackness that could be detected by radar but not seen by the eye.

The objects were known to be solid and many were very, very large—capable of sucking a ship into orbit and destroying it. Efforts at identification had been fruitless. For the time being, the transports' navigators simply charted courses around the "objects." Travel through The Beyond required steady nerves on the part of the transport's twenty pilots and ten navigators.

Once disembarked on Shammua, Caleb took a cab—as hovercrafts did not work well in Shammua's heavier gravity. The streets of Shaphat teemed with wheeled vehicles and beasts of burden, along with the accompanying scent of emissions, both beast and mechanical. Caleb took in the city's sights and sounds while trying to become accustomed to an extra forty pounds of body weight.

Caleb also had to fight repeated waves of dizziness and tension—his sensitivity to the Adversaries' dark power was yet another Healer curse. Adversarial presence like he had never seen before accounted for this. Anxiety became a squatter in his belly. He fought to keep his head clear as he moved through the city.

Caleb also noted a significant military presence—unheard of on the only planet in The Trihedron which did not support a military outpost of any kind.

Caleb found lodging at a casual inn, and made a confercom report to Marcelle. No picture could be displayed this far out and the sound quality left much to be desired. Marcelle's voice issued forth from the speakers with the scratchy warble of an old Victrola. The antique quality of Marcelle's voice went well with the sepia light from Shammua's melancholy sun, which poured through the room's only window.

"O'Shea ... (*scratch*) ... (*scratch*) ... I've been concerned about what you've told me ... (*scratch*) ... I've sent reinforcements (*scratch*)."

Even though Marcelle was out of the reach of Caleb's mind reading capability, he felt a keen sense of unease at Marcelle's statement.

"Yes, I noticed and I don't think it's necessary, just give me some more time to figure out what's going on."

"... (*scratch*)... It's too late already, O'Shea, I've sent word to Shentook ... (*scratch*) ... It won't be long before she deploys more troops to The Beyond ... keep me posted." Marcelle signed off before Caleb could respond.

The Third Universe could be looking at the beginning of a full-scale war, but with only one planet and a host of invisible celestial bodies, what would this accomplish? Caleb thought. *There is no purpose for it ... unless there is something more here ... something about The Beyond and its mysteries and maybe ... just maybe ... Marcelle already knows far more about it than I do.*

Wanting to find out what Marcelle already knew, Caleb knew just the place to learn about the local gossip. He set out for a tavern called *Zoan Veta*—an impressive establishment with a bar made of highly polished Earth obsidian. Except for the owner, a deserted tavern greeted Caleb. A few well-chosen questions later, and Caleb walked about four blocks to a nearby hospital, bound for the psychiatric ward in the South Wing.

A white-faced, Nahbian female nurse stopped him.

"Yes, I'm here to see Chuck Wesley."

The nurse's remarkable expression of surprise was not uncommon—all of the Nahbians' facial expressions were exaggerated. Her nametag identified her as Vian. "Master Wesley isn't allowed to have visitors. He's easily agitated and his doctor doesn't allow it."

"May I have his doctor's name?"

She consulted a chart. "Dr. Trent Rivers. But, Dr. Rivers is out today."

At that moment, a human male approached. His uniform and bearing marked him as a doctor. His face had the distinct look of a Native American.

"Hi. I'm Dr. Paul Fighting Bear. What seems to be the problem?" He shook Caleb's hand—the touch transferred some interesting information to Caleb. Fighting Bear descended from a long line of powerful shaman. He also experienced visions, nothing as powerful as Caleb's, but still significant.

The doctor searched Caleb's face during the brief contact—as if trying to measure his worth. Caleb wondered what he saw. After a moment, Fighting Bear turned to the nurse. "It's okay, I'll take him to see Wesley."

He led Caleb down to the end of the hallway. He held up one of his hands for I.D. scanning. A short click followed as the lock disengaged.

Nothing could have prepared Caleb for what he saw.

Wrapped in a restraining jacket, Wesley huddled on the cold tile floor in a corner across the room. Wesley heard Caleb and Fighting Bear enter and raised his head, revealing the horror where his eyes had been. Long scars raked the skin around the empty sockets. Caleb knew Chuck Wesley was only forty-eight years old—still in his prime. The man in the corner bore the deeply etched lines of a man in his seventies.

From the tavern owner, Caleb had already known that two years ago Chuck Wesley had gone berserk one day and attacked the owner of a private space shuttle. Wesley stole the craft, made an unauthorized launch then headed toward and beyond Shammua's sun. Wesley disappeared from radar—vanished like the spy before him. After a month, Chuck Wesley had been presumed dead. His craft returned three months later. When the police opened the shuttle they found Wesley ranting and hysterical. He clawed his eyes out on the way to the hospital.

"How are you today, Chuck?" Dr. Fighting Bear asked.

Caleb expected a ranting maniac, but Wesley answered clearly, "I've been better, Doc."

"You have a visitor, Chuck. His name is Caleb O'Shea."

"Dr. Rivers doesn't let me have visitors."

"Dr. Rivers isn't here and what he doesn't know won't hurt him."

Caleb glanced sharply at the doctor, eyebrows raised.

Wesley laughed. "You don't like that bastard any more than I do. Do you, Doc? He's crazier than I am!" After a brief pause, "Okay, O'Shea. What do you want?"

"I was sent by Etienne Marcelle."

Wesley smiled and turned his face in the general direction of Caleb's voice. "Ah, you're my replacement. Nice to meet you. Take my advice and get out of here as quick as you can. The warriors are not plotting to assault us."

"I know."

Wesley's smile suddenly disappeared. "What do you know?"

"It's the Adversaries we need to be afraid of. They're the ones who are up to something. The warriors are not an undeclared species. I believe they're trying to stop the Adversaries from whatever it is they're planning. How am I doing so far?"

Wesley nodded, his Adam's Apple bobbed nervously. "Do you know what the warriors are?"

Caleb glanced self-consciously at Fighting Bear. The doctor's wore an unreadable expression. Caleb took a deep breath. "The warriors are archangels."

Wesley whistled slowly. "Looks like you've just about got it all figured out. But, you're missing a detail or two to finish this puzzle, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Have you learned the secret of the Beyond, yet?"

"No."

"The Adversaries have discovered where God hid the Garden of Eden—more specifically, the Tree of Life. According to the Bible, eating the fruit of the Tree of Life will enable someone to live forever. God banned mankind from it after Adam and Eve screwed up so bad. God ran Adam and Eve out and posted a heavenly guard—flaming sword and all. Eventually, He hid Eden. The Beyond has many, many secrets—one of them is The Garden of Eden. The Beyond is a place of cloaks and veils ...

"Marcelle is a *minion*—a willing servant of the Adversaries. He has no real powers, other than political. On the other hand, Dr. Rivers is an Adversary. They've kept me isolated here for interrogation. They want me to tell them how I got into Eden."

"You've been to the Garden of Eden ..." Caleb unsuccessfully tried to keep skepticism from his tone.

"Sure I have. After I left Eden, I was freaked out at first, but I'm better now." Wesley sounded perfectly reasonable. "There's more. The Adversaries have established a colony just outside of Shaphat's city limits. Their number is growing almost daily. They're trying to figure out how to storm Eden's gate. I know God won't let them in, but if they keep it up they're going to piss off the Creator and get us all into trouble."

"All this is so hard to believe."

"Have you noticed a military presence on Shammua? An unnecessary military presence?" Wesley leaned forward—anticipating his answer.

"Yes"

"Don't be a fool, O'Shea! Marcelle is a minion ... you've got to know what that means! He's going to fake a war," Wesley's eyebrows knitted themselves together

over empty sockets. "Can you imagine what modern bombs would do to Eden's gate? Think about it!"

Caleb dropped to his knees in front of Wesley. "What can I do to stop this?"

"You'll need our help," Wesley answered. "Isn't that right, Doc?"

"Yep."

Caleb glanced back and forth from one man to the other.

Wesley continued, "God still talks to me. I spent some time with Him after I found my way to The Garden."

"God talks to you ..." Caleb repeated in a weak voice.

"Sure, He does. He's talking to me now. He's saying, 'Tell the Healer that he already knows what needs to be done.'"

And ... suddenly Caleb knew. He had never passed The Gift on before, but knew how it was done. He got up and approached the doctor first. "Would you accept the Gifts of a Healer?"

"Yes." His brave tone did not mask his true feelings—Caleb knew his fear as Paul Fighting Bear called on God in that moment, as well as ancestors and visions he'd communed with since childhood. Fighting Bear had a previous vision of this moment, which spurred his belief in Chuck Wesley's wild story of a trip into the Garden of Eden.

"Open your shirt, Doc," Caleb instructed.

Paul obeyed and Caleb placed a hand on Paul's forehead and one in the center of his chest—over his heart. Caleb opened himself as a conduit and called on the Creator. The power came in a full, loving rush—liquid light. Paul moaned as the power coming through Caleb's hands filled him. He shed tears—knowing complete joy in a communion with The Source. The giving soon ended but Caleb knew the love remained as a new Healer had been made.

Caleb and Paul removed Chuck's straight jacket and Caleb repeated the process to make Chuck a Healer. Chuck no longer had eyes, but upon being Gifted, he acquired a form of second sight enabling him to see without them.

Afterward, the three Healers left the room, the nurse screamed upon seeing them come down the hall and would have set off the alarm, but Caleb touched her arm and said, "Sleep."

She slept.

Anak and two-hundred archangels joined the three Healers and the ambush of the Adversary colony began after nightfall. Several angels stood as sentinels around the colony's perimeter and the destruction was masked from outside help until it was over.

Even caught off guard, the Adversaries were difficult to defeat. Caleb was armed with his powers ... and a laser knife. Fighting Bear went into battle armed primitively with a bow and arrow, while Chuck chose a modern approach with a Smith and Wesson laser cannon.

Caleb had known it would not be easy—but it required a bloodbath to rid Shammua of the Adversary threat. No Adversaries were spared—male or female. Later, drenched in the blood of the enemy and exhausted from the fight, Caleb stood next to Anak and watched the others burn the buildings down.

"You know it's not over," Anak said, his face illuminated by the flickering light of the massive pyre. "Trent Rivers got away. He boarded a transport before you arrived."

Suddenly, Caleb had a flash of memory. The dark eyed Adversary in Ammiel's spaceport ... The one with the triumphant grin ... Trent Rivers.

"He'll gather his remaining Adversaries," Anak continued, "and then he'll make more ... And, he still has Etienne Marcelle in his pocket with a military backup. In the meantime, you'll need to make an army of your own."

Caleb raised his hands and stared at the blood that stained them. "I know."

"It's time for you to visit The Garden, Caleb."

Caleb watched the flames frolic like the pagans that used to dance before them. Even after the horror of the last few hours—nothing frightened him more than hearing Anak say "It's time to visit The Garden."

Caleb boarded a private space shuttle with Anak a while later. He charted a course beyond Shammua's sun. After a day's travel in mind-bending darkness, a large object (which Anak told him to ignore) began to register on his radar. A pinpoint of light appeared at an indeterminate distance ahead. After another day's journey, Caleb's radar began emitting urgent impact warning bleeps.

"Steady, Healer," Anak whispered just before impact. "Keep going."

Caleb hit the invisible object at killer speed and drifted through a spinning dream in which he thought he heard his sweet Isabelle praying for him.

Caleb came to, lying in a soft patch of grass, in a bright garden surrounded by achingly intense beauty. Several yards away, his ship looked intact.

Caleb stood up and Anak appeared beside him dressed in a gleaming white robe. His sword rested in a jeweled sheath across his back. Caleb smiled and looked around him with innocent wonder—like a toddler seeing soap bubbles blown for the first time. Such joy. Love and peace surrounded him. He knew he would never be safer than at that moment.

With a grin, Anak said, "Someone would like to have a word with you." He pointed to a tall, figure in the distance, standing beneath the largest fruit tree Caleb had ever seen. The figure turned, robe shimmering subtle colors, and walked toward them in casual, human fashion. The closer the figure got, the more overwhelmed Caleb became. Soon, Caleb fell to his knees in tears and bowed low to the ground.

The touch of a gentle hand, on top of his head, comforted him ...

* * *

Caleb laughed as he watched the antics of his toddlers, Sage and Danielle.

As if they had not seen him in sixty years rather than sixty minutes, the children ran to his hug his legs as he emerged from his study. "Daddy ... Daddy!"

He picked them up in a swoop and cuddled the babies. Isabelle came into the room and laughed at them. Caleb's smile faded when the twins froze and looked toward the front door.

"De man's coming, Daddy," said Sage.

"Tell mither marthel I said, 'Hi,'" chirped Danielle. The doorbell rang.

Isabelle came and gathered the children from out of his arms. She kissed his cheek and shooed the little ones into the playroom.

Caleb opened the door to find Etienne Marcelle on the threshold. Caleb suggested they take a walk down to the beach. A short walk, as the beach now comprised part of Caleb's backyard.

Without preamble, Caleb asked, "Are you sure you've withdrawn all the military troops from Shammua?"

"Of course." Marcelle's neutral expression did not hide his lie from Caleb, which was unfortunate.

"*You'll do what you must do when the time comes ...*" Anak had said.

Marcelle started again to plead. "I fulfilled my part of the deal, O'Shea. I talked Shentook into pulling the troops from Shammua. Now, you must tell me what God's message was ... I've got to know."

Caleb steeled himself. It had taken several months, after his return, for him to be able to talk about the experience - even to Isabelle. He still did not like to speak of it - because it was like drowning, he became so overwhelmed.

However, he had promised Marcelle, if he would stop hounding for a year and make sure Shammua was safe from military threat, then Caleb would reveal God's message.

Caleb watched waves chase each other to the shore. "You really want to know this?"

Marcelle gaped. "Yes, more than anything."

Caleb said the words quietly, but he knew Marcelle heard them clearly ... and then he knew Marcelle wished for ignorance ... especially when Caleb turned terrible, powerful-filled eyes toward him.

"Tell My children to learn love. I am infinite, but My patience is not."

Marcelle grabbed his chest as his heart exploded. His expression of shock faded with his life as he fell to the sand.... Then a salty wind snagged the words and stole them away.

THE END

FEAR ITSELF

J.E. GURLEY

Ira Cooper knew that when the dying sun dropped below the jagged, tooth-edged lip of the canyon, the shadows would come alive, again. Tonight would be the decimated squad's second night in the twisted maze of frozen stone walls. Tonight, there would be far fewer weapons to ward off the silent death that emerged from the living shadows when they least expected it.

With one final flicker of blood red light, the sun disappeared. Darkness fell upon them like a black shroud, enveloping the frightened men in a cloud of invisibility. Each felt alone, cut off from the support and comradery of his companions. The silence was palpable as each soldier held his breath lest it become his last. Long seconds passed before the slightest scuffle of a foot or the puff of an exhaled breath broke the silence.

They were safe for now.

"Lights!" the squad's fatigued leader, Sergeant Ira Cooper called out as he flicked on his gunlight. As each grunt turned on the powerful flashlight attached to the end of his weapon, the small circle of light grew larger until it encompassed the group.

Seven lights. Seven men left out of a unit of thirty-eight. Death had come quickly if not mercifully to most when the Hercules C-130E carrying them to their target site had crashed. Six more had simply disappeared during the previous night, swallowed by the ancient and weathered rocks of the canyon.

"Check your ammo!" Cooper called out, knowing they were running low. His own .767automatic had only one extra clip. His .45 pistol had none. "Don't fire at shadows," he warned, but shadows were all they had seen. In truth, he did not think their weapons were effective but the men needed to think they were capable of defeating this unseen enemy, this nameless killer. They fought by instinct, just like any other mission.

So far, the mission had been a cascading cluster fuck of bad luck. Instead of the hot insertion mission into the Congo promised to him, Cooper had suddenly received orders to attach to a recon group destined for a bug hunt in Arizona. Once there, he discovered the leader of the bug hunt was none other than Captain Lawrence Meeks, the CO that had busted him from Master Sergeant two years earlier. Tensions had run high from the beginning and Cooper had expected tempers to flare.

All of this had become moot when the big Hercules C-130 Talon I fell from the sky like a 50-ton rock, clipped a rocky outcropping with the starboard wing and dropped out of control into a narrow canyon, killing Captain Meeks and over half the unit.

Cooper still remembered the gut-wrenching feeling in his stomach when the engines cut off. The Herc had been flying low, using terrain avoidance radar in the mountainous country. Suddenly, all the power died. He bent over just as instructed, but it did little good when the big Herc started to disintegrate around him. The HumVees, the extra ammo, and, most importantly, their

food, had gone up in the blaze. If not for the fire suppression fuel tanks, none of them would have made it out alive.

Meeks lived long enough to charge Cooper with completing the mission.

"Cooper," he gasped out with his last dying breath. "Don't screw this one up."

Cooper was beginning to think they were screwed from the get-go.

Now, they were wandering a maze of narrow, twisting canyons with no idea of where they were. The GPS system had bought it in the crash. The sun overhead had given them a vague bearing but not precise enough to help because of the low-lying cloud cover. They were wandering blindly through a damnation valley.

"We're dead meat out here, Sarge," Corporal Stan Evans complained, jolting Cooper back to the present. "We need a fire or something."

Corporal Evans was a good man but, like the others, Cooper suspected he had reached his limits and was scared.

"You see any wood around here, Evans?" Cooper shot at him. "Keep your eyes open."

"We could go back to the wreck. There's got to be fuel left in the auxiliary fuel tanks," Evans suggested.

Cooper knew Evans was probably right about the fuel, but knew he could not take his men back through those winding canyons they had just left, not in the dark.

"Six men, Evans," Cooper reminded him. "We lost six men and we don't what the hell got them!" He had raised his voice and the other men were muttering. If he showed fear, the others would lose it for sure. "Okay, listen up!" he shouted to them. "There's something out there. We can't see it but sure as hell can see us. The light seems to keep it away so keep your weapons pointed at the shadows and for Christ sakes don't shoot each other!"

"Sinclair, Mullins! Take the point. You've got night vision gear. Use it!" He looked at the other men, recognized the fright on their faces. "Esteban, take drag."

Esteban nodded and turned to walk off into the night. He hated to send Victor Esteban. Esteban was the best man he had but that was exactly why Cooper needed him watching their ass. His instincts were good and, so far, he seemed to be the only man not spooked by whatever was out there, stalking them. In fact, Esteban was eager to take on whatever it was.

Cooper slapped Esteban on his helmet. When Esteban turned, he said, "Stay frosty out there, amigo."

Esteban winked and stalked off.

"Okay, you dirt monkeys. Walk single file and for Christ sakes, scan the terrain on your flanks."

He stopped McIlhenney, the Signal's Officer. "Anything on that tracker yet?"

McIlhenney did not take his eyes off the scope. "No sir. I've got Sinclair, Mullins and Esteban but nothing

else. Of course, I was tracking Anderson and Wilkins too," he reminded Cooper needlessly.

Cooper had been watching the tracker when the two men's signals had suddenly stopped. A horrible scream had echoed down the canyon a couple of seconds later. When they went back, they had found nothing, not even blood, just Anderson's unfired weapon lying on the ground.

"Keep trying," he said. He knew the tracker was unreliable. Everything else, even their watches, had stopped when power to the Herc failed. Luckily, they had salvaged a case of batteries for the gunlights and tracker.

"Yes, sir."

"Damn it! Quit calling me sir. I work for a living."

"Yes ... Sarge," McIlhenney corrected himself.

The sky was a narrow ribbon of stars, their edges ragged, defined by the walls of the canyon jutting above them. There would be no moon tonight, no relief from the oppressive darkness.

Their mission had been to investigate a report of a downed ship of unknown configuration in southern Arizona. Two F-18E Strike Eagles out of Tucson had intercepted and attacked the craft before losing it on their scopes.

Cooper cursed again under his breath at his bad luck in joining the useless bug hunt. Now, he wasn't so sure it was useless. Something was killing his men and it sure as hell wasn't Cochise's ghost.

"The rest of you men keep your eyes open and your mouths shut." He said this in spite of the fact the men seemed too frightened to talk. They were busy scanning as much terrain as they could see in the small circles of light of their gunlights.

A low, mournful wail set Cooper's teeth on edge. He was certain it was just the wind but it sounded like a banshee. Strange sounds—falling rocks, slithering sounds, buzzing sounds—had followed them since the wreck. He didn't need a sixth sense to know something was out there.

"Olivette! Pick up those big size elevens. You sound like you're dragging a dead body." Even as he said it, he knew it was the wrong choice of words. Olivette and Anderson had been buddies. Olivette shot him cold hard glance before moving off.

Someone screamed and a weapon went off, then several.

"Everybody down!" After he hit the dirt, Cooper asked. "Who fired that round?"

"I did! Chalmers, sir! Something touched my face!" Chalmers sounded panicked.

Lights were playing across the canyon walls and into the air like searchlights at a new car sale. A fluttering shape whisked by inches from Cooper's face. He recognized it immediately.

"It was a bat, Chalmers," he said as he stood up. "Try not to let your imagination run wild."

He waited for an answer.

"Chalmers?" he repeated.

Again, there was no answer.

"Count off!"

"Olivette here."

"McIlhenney. I'm all right, for now."

"Evans!"

With Esteban, Sinclair and Mullins out, that left Chalmers.

"Anybody see Chalmers?"

"He was right in front of me," Evans said. "His muzzle flash almost blinded me."

Olivette spoke up. "When we hit the deck, he was off to the right."

"Search the perimeter."

"There were five dots on the tracker when we hit the dirt," McIlhenney volunteered. "Now there're four."

"What about point and drag?"

"They're still there."

Ten minutes later, he had to admit Chalmers was gone like the others. They had heard nothing and seen nothing, except for the bat and Cooper was damn sure a bat didn't carry him off.

They waited for Esteban to catch up. When he learned of Chalmers's disappearance, he grimaced. "I saw something, Sarge. It looked ... well, it looked like the rock was moving, flowing. When I got closer, there was nothing there."

Cooper pondered this a moment. If any of the others had said this, he would have dismissed it as hysteria. "Must have been a trick of the light, Esteban. No rock is killing my men."

"No, Sarge," Esteban agreed, but Cooper thought he sounded unconvinced.

A few minutes later, Sinclair ran back from point. Cooper had to slap down the barrel of Evans' weapon when Evans almost shot Sinclair. Sinclair was almost out of breath.

"We found something up ahead," he wheezed. "Looks like wreckage."

Cooper looked behind Sinclair, down the canyon. "Where's Mullins?"

Sinclair spun around. "He was right behind me, Sarge. I just saw him. Maybe he went back."

Cooper sighed. Two more men gone and still no sign of the enemy.

"Okay. Let's take a look at this wreckage. Maybe Mullins is waiting for us up ahead. Keep together and keep an eye out for Chalmers and Mullins."

"Chalmers?" Sinclair questioned.

Cooper said nothing as he waved them forward.

The canyon continued to twist and turn for another couple of clicks. At a convergence of a second, larger canyon, their lights reflected off pieces of metal scattered like confetti over the sand and gravel.

Cooper picked up a piece and was surprised at how lightweight and flimsy it was but he would bet a month's pay it was a lot stronger than it looked. From the size and number of pieces, it looked as if the craft had been smaller than one of the F-18s that had shot it down.

The metal felt warm as he held it in his hand. Suddenly, the metal strip began to melt like wax and enveloped his right hand. With Esteban's help, he pried it off before it went hard again.

"What the Hell ..." he muttered. The metal had resumed its original shape.

"It's like it conforms to any shape you want," McIlhenney suggested. "Maybe it was a part of some kind of seat."

"Yeah, maybe." Cooper walked through the debris field, noting the unusually small size of the pieces spread across the ground. "You would think at least one section would be larger. It would have to be moving pretty damn fast to do this much damage but there's no sign of an impact crater."

Esteban pointed to the canyon rim. "Maybe it hit up higher and showered debris over the edge."

"Yeah, maybe," Cooper said again, "But, what kind of creature could live through this kind of crash?"

"You think this is our UFO, Sarge?"

"Does this look like anything we've got, Esteban?"

Cooper picked up one piece of metal and held it out for Esteban's inspection. From one side, the piece looked like any other piece of debris. When Esteban turned it around, it was as clear as glass.

"Madre de Dios," he whispered and threw it back down on the ground.

"Some kind of polarized metal," McIlhenney said, picking the piece up and examining it carefully. "Just the thing for a view port of a spaceship," he commented.

Cooper nodded. "Fan out by twos. Look for anything ... unusual."

"More unusual than a spaceship?" McIlhenney joked.

"Yeah, McIlhenney, the pilot," Cooper shot at him, pleased to see the Signal Officer's mouth slam shut.

For over an hour, they searched the debris field and the surrounding area by gunlight, finding nothing. When they met back up, Esteban pointed to one area of the wreckage.

"Sarge, I swear there were three pieces of that metal here by this rock. Now there's one bigger one."

"Are you telling me the damn thing's putting itself back together again, like Humpty Dumpty?"

"Humpty Dumpty didn't rebuild himself, Sarge. Remember, "All the King's horses -"

"Shut up McIlhenney? The point is; it ain't possible!"

"I think Esteban's right, Sarge," Evans added. "There's a piece here as big as a wash tub and drag marks around it. Look!"

Cooper saw grooves in the sand that ran from two spots to one two-meter long piece of metal. When he touched it, it was very warm.

All this alien business was new to Cooper. He knew he wasn't very imaginative but had always assumed that UFOs, Big Foot, and the like were just big jokes. Faced with this situation and no one to fight, he was at a loss.

He was standing, thinking, when Esteban called to him quietly.

"There's somebody out there, Sarge."

Cooper motioned for everyone to take cover. "Hold your fire," he whispered. "It could be Chalmers or Mullins."

"Hello," a weak voice called from the darkness, a voice Cooper knew he shouldn't be hearing.

"Come in slowly," he replied. He held his weapon level, ready to fire.

As the lights trained on the figure, he heard several men gasp. It was Captain Meeks.

"What's going on here, Sergeant Cooper? Where are the rest of my men?"

"Meeks?" Cooper replied in disbelief. "You were dead, sir. I saw you."

Meeks laughed. "Dead? Don't be stupid, Cooper. I woke up and found myself alone."

Cooper's voice began to take on a whining tenor. "We buried you, Captain, you and twenty-four others, plus the crew of the Herc!" he wailed.

"Have you been drinking, Cooper? I'll have all your stripes for this!" Meeks yelled.

"It's true, sir," Esteban steeped in. "I helped with the graves."

Meeks stared at Esteban. "There were no graves. I woke up sitting in my HumVee but it wouldn't crank. Where's my driver?"

"Dead with the others, sir," Cooper reported. He kept his weapon trained on Meeks. He knew the dead shouldn't be walking, but then again, metal you can see through doesn't put itself back together again either.

Meeks was shouting now. "There were no others, Cooper! Where are the rest of my men and what you doing sitting here while there's a job to be done?"

Cooper walked toward Meeks, keeping his weapon pointed at him. "We crashed, sir. We buried 26 men, including you. Eight more have disappeared since. You can't be Captain Meeks. He's dead. If you come any closer, I'll shoot."

"Don't be silly, man! I'll have you up on charges for threatening a superior. Now get these men out of here!" Meeks started forward. A startled expression crossed his face seconds before a red flower began to sprout from his chest. The shot echoed down the canyon as Meeks fell slowly to his knees.

Cooper turned to see Esteban still aiming his weapon at Meeks, smoke coming from the barrel. "Lower your weapon, Esteban!" he barked. Esteban had a look of

horror on his face when he turned to face Cooper. He slowly lowered his weapon.

Meeks was swaying, struggling to rise from his knees. He held one hand to his chest, blood seeping around it. The other he used to point at Cooper. "You'll hang for this, Cooper. You men!" he yelled. "You bear witness to what took place. This man isn't fit for command. He betrayed his command once, now he's done it again."

Meeks crumpled like a marionette with its strings cut, falling face first in the dirt.

"It couldn't be Meeks, Sarge. Could it?" Esteban was staring at the dead Captain. "We buried him, didn't we?"

Esteban's confusion was contagious as soldiers looked at each other, wondering if the man standing next to them was his buddy or whatever Meeks was.

Cooper walked over to Meeks and examined the body. To his non-medical eye, it looked like Meeks, even had Meeks's wallet and papers.

He looked at his men and shrugged. "I don't know. It's Meeks but we all saw Meeks go in the ground, right?"

They all slowly nodded.

"The dead don't walk," he said more for his benefit than for theirs.

"What if they weren't dead? What if we buried them all alive?" McIlhenney's voice had an edge of hysteria to it. "What if they just stopped working, like the electronics? Maybe—"

"Stow it, McIlhenney," Cooper shot at him.

"But, Sarge—"

"That's enough!" Cooper shouted. "All of you! Get your heads on straight! We buried Meeks and the others because they were dead, damn it! Burned to a crisp. This can't be Meeks!"

He pointed his weapon at Meeks but the body was no longer there. "What the ...!"

"Let's get out of here, Sarge," Olivette begged. His eyes roamed the shadows as he spoke. Cooper could see his hands trembling as they twisted around his weapon.

"No, we stay here." Cooper grabbed Olivette by the collar and forced him to focus on his face. "We dig in, set a perimeter and wait for daylight. Then we go home. Got it?"

Olivette nodded his head. "D ... dig in."

Cooper slapped him on the shoulder. "Pull yourself together, Olivette. I need you."

Around them, in the darkness, he could hear noises in the distance, scuffling, shuffling sounds like men dragging heavy objects.

"Sarge," Esteban called out softly and motioned down the canyon with his light.

Cooper nodded. He waved his arm. "Up against the wall over there."

He and his remaining four men took up a defensive position in a narrow defile, all weapons pointed toward the open wash. Their back was against the wall, literally,

and Cooper knew now how Custer must have felt. At least Custer could see the 5,000 Indians attacking him.

"Don't fire until I give the word."

Five flashlights provided little light to cover the canyon floor. Cooper prayed the batteries lasted until dawn.

The noises grew louder. Now, it sounded like stumbling drunkards dragging dead bodies. The fine hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

"Jesus Christ!" Evans muttered as the first of their comrades came into view. Some were merely blackened, unidentifiable corpses. Others, he recognized. Among them were Meeks and Chalmers.

They were each dragging pieces of the strange metal behind them. Evidently, the debris field was much larger than he had thought. In the dark, they could have walked by tons of it. Even in the daylight, if the polarized side had been facing them, it would have been invisible.

"What the fuck...?" Esteban started but Cooper cut him off.

He watched fascinated as the men, his dead men, dragged large pieces of metal to the center of the wash. He was amazed as the pieces began to merge into an elongated oval shape. Slowly, minute by minute, the loose mass of pliable metal became a ship, a space ship.

"It's a God damn ship," Esteban whispered. "It's our bugs."

The zombies paid no attention to the gunlights or to the five nearby men. They worked slowly and awkwardly, but diligently. They seemed not to need light by which to see what they were doing.

After several hours, they were finished. The zombies backed away and stood in a rough circle around the strange spacecraft.

"What are they waiting on?" McIlhenney asked.

"The crew," Cooper told him, guessing.

Just as he spoke, pieces of the canyon wall began to move, flowing like water, breaking away and moving to the clearing.

"See, I told you," Esteban said.

The rock began to change shape, becoming less stone-like and more biological. Now at least seven of the creatures stood in the clearing, slowly changing into humanoid or at least, partially humanoid shapes.

They had two legs and two appendages for arms but their heads were flat and featureless except for a fringe of short, writhing tentacles, like a sea anemone. The seven stood and made low moaning noises. Two more emerged from the canyon walls.

Suddenly, the rock beside Cooper started to move. Acting on instinct, he rolled away from the wall and leveled his weapon. He fired off a short burst but it had no effect, simply bouncing harmlessly off the creature's stony exterior.

As it moved away from the canyon wall, its surface began to flow like the others. Cooper fired once more. This time, the bullets penetrated. The creature wailed loudly and began to shake wildly. It waddled to the

clearing as the others joined in firing. It left a trail of yellow ichor that writhed on the ground like a living thing.

The other creatures paid no attention to the fate of their companion. They were filing into an opening in the ship. Four of the zombie men followed them into the opening. The door closed and the other animated corpses collapsed.

The remaining creature began to cry out in a high-pitched ululation that slammed into Cooper's eardrums like a hot poker. He dropped his weapon and covered his ears with his hands.

The creatures in the ship ignored their deserted and wounded companion. The ship began to lift with a blast of scorching hot air that swept across the clearing, raising a cloud of dust. The remaining creature burst into flames and disintegrated into a puddle of yellow ooze.

The ship rose out of the canyon just as the sun burst over the eastern edge of the mountains. The ship glimmered once; then disappeared.

Afterwards, Cooper and the four survivors walked around the corpses of his men.

"They must have reanimated our men to help gather pieces of their ship," McIlhenney suggested. Cooper figured it was as close to the truth as they would ever get. "I wonder where they were from."

"Hell," Esteban commented.

"What did they want with the other four guys? They were dead."

Cooper didn't answer. He knew he was going to have hard enough time explaining this to the Brass. He didn't want to speculate on things he didn't know but judging from the gnawed condition of a few of the corpses, he supposed the aliens, like his men, had lost their supplies in the crash and it was long way back home.

He knew in spite of his hunger, it would be along while before food set well in his stomach again.

THE END

PUTTING DOWN ROOTS

JOE MCKINNEY

The homeless were restless. It wasn't even full dark yet, and already they were gathering under the bridge, bustling with a sort of mute agitation. Doc had come down early, hoping to get a dry spot for the night, but now it didn't look that was going to happen. Too many people were moving into the area.

A big South Texas rainmaker was gathering overhead. Lightning ripped across the belly of the sky and thunder followed, rattling his senses. He knew he'd get drenched if he didn't find shelter soon, but all the activity made him nervous. Crowds usually meant trouble, and Doc had survived on the streets for a long time because he knew how to avoid trouble.

He stopped a man named Bobby Earl and asked him what was going on.

"It's Jackson," Bobby Earl said. "Something's wrong with him. He's got something on his skin."

"What do you mean? Like a rash?"

Bobby Earl shrugged. "Ain't like no rash I ever seen. It's all green."

"Green?"

"Yeah. It's nasty looking. Go and check it out if you want."

Doc went under the bridge and saw a bunch of guys running around collecting sugar packets. The junkies believed the sugar helped with the shakes, but Doc knew that wasn't the problem. Jackson was a drinker. He never touched heroin.

Somebody yelled out Doc's name. The others called him Doc because he could bandage a dog bite or even set a broken bone when he had to, but it was just a nickname. The only thing he knew about medicine was what he'd learned in the U.S. Army's Field Medic School thirty years earlier, and he'd forgotten most of that.

A woman named Carla took him to Jackson, and one glance was all it took for Doc to know it was more than a rash.

Jackson was stretched out on a bedroll. The others had tried to make him comfortable, but he still looked bad. His skin had grown over with something that looked like moss. It was thick and spongy to the touch and vibrantly green. Moist like the bark on a rotten log.

Doc turned Jackson's chin one way and then the other, lifting it so he could see his throat. The moss was white and delicate around the throat, almost like cobwebs. He pulled at it gently with his finger and realized that it was much stronger than cobwebs.

The same cobweb-like stuff was growing in the pits of his arms and in the spaces between his fingers.

"Jackson, can you hear me? It's me, Doc."

Jackson's eyes were crusted over with a slick green film that looked like transparent algae. Doc could see

Jackson's eyes moving lazily beneath the film, but he couldn't tell if Jackson could see him or not.

Either way, it didn't look like Jackson was in pain.

In fact, the noises he made sounded like a man having sweet dreams.

Thunder rolled over them, and a moment later the rain came hard and heavy, the sound of falling water drowning out even the slapping of the cars on the bridge above them.

Doc studied Jackson and his disease in the blue flashes of the lightning, his mind going through the possible causes. "Does anybody know if he's been drinking from that canal by the railroad yard again?"

No one knew for sure.

"He smells good," said one of the onlookers, trying to be helpful.

Another man slapped him on the shoulder and told him to shut up, but Doc had noticed the smell too. When he leaned in close to look at the mossy stuff on Jackson's chest, he could smell the sweet, ozone odor of clean air.

It was almost intoxicating.

Doc pulled back the blanket the others had put over Jackson's legs, and everybody gasped. He'd been wearing jeans and heavy boots, but there was little left of the denim and leather.

The moss had eaten most of it away.

And it was different than the moss on his chest. It was thick and ropy; more like ivy, with broad flat leaves the size of a man's palm.

Hundreds of little yellow nodules that looked like dried figs were nestled at the base of the leaves. Doc rolled one of the nodules between his fingers, but it didn't feel like anything vegetable. More like hot, wet human skin.

He tugged gently on one of the vines and felt its hold on Jackson's skin. It gave a little, but only just a little.

"Help me get this off him," Doc said to the others, and a dozen pair of hands reached in and pulled at the vines.

Somebody managed to get a vine loose and yanked it hard, causing Jackson to erupt in a horrible, gut-wrenching scream. He bolted upright and thrashed at the hands on his body, slapping them away with surprising strength and speed.

The others scattered. They hid behind pillars and grocery carts and anything else they could put between themselves and the screaming man-bush of moss and vines that Jackson had become.

Only Doc held his ground. He tried to calm Jackson, but couldn't reach him. The man was too far gone.

Jackson spun around, still screaming, the moss and vines curling around him and dragging over the ground like the train of a bride's wedding gown.

Doc tried to steer him back down to the bedroll, but Jackson pushed him away.

He ran into the rain and headed for the canal.

Doc ran after him. A few of the others left their hiding spots and followed at a cautious distance. As lightning flashed above them and the rain came down in shimmering silver sheets, Jackson ran across the access road and jumped down the embankment to the canal.

He hit the water at full speed and disappeared beneath its black surface. Doc stopped at the bank, staring at the spreading ripples.

A few of the homeless crept closer for a better look.

"Why did he do that?" somebody asked.

Nobody answered.

They stood on the bank for several minutes, the rain coming down all around them. When Jackson didn't come back up, they drifted back to the bridge in small sad groups of twos and threes.

Doc was the last to leave.

The rains stopped just before morning, though dawn never really broke. The sky remained a thick gray sagging belly of threatening storm clouds with no trace of sun.

Around ten o'clock Doc went down to the canal.

Overnight the banks had become a dense jungle of moss and vines, fifteen feet high in some places.

It was vibrantly green and pearly with water drops, except for the little yellow nodules that looked like dried figs. They were denser, and firmer, than they had felt the night before, only now they were clustered in groups of three on long green woody boles that reminded Doc of bamboo.

Every time he squeezed one of the nodules, it released more of that intoxicating odor of clean air and ozone, and he had to shake himself loose from its spell.

There was no sign of Jackson.

Doc hoped he had simply slipped into the night and found someplace to sleep it off, but as he looked around at the vegetation choking the banks, he couldn't get past the feeling that something bad had happened.

He walked back up the embankment, rubbing his hands. They'd been itching fiercely since he woke up.

He rubbed them against the thighs of his jeans and looked at his palms. They were bright red and raw, and yellow blisters had formed a sort of bracelet around his wrists.

He pulled his sleeves over the blisters and followed the access road to his regular intersection along the interstate. The freeway had an upper and a lower level there so that if it started to rain again he could stand out of the wet and still be in the intersection.

He took a worn piece of cardboard out of his pack and unfolded it so passing motorists could see where he'd written, "HUNGRY HOMELESS ANYTHING WILL HELP," in great big black letter.

Almost as soon as he opened his sign, a white-haired woman in a big shiny Buick put a five dollar bill in his hand and gave his fingers an encouraging squeeze.

"Bless you, ma'am," he said, and she smiled.

A woman named Elizabeth worked the opposite corner. Her gig was a baby doll she'd found in a dumpster. She wrapped the doll in a soiled blanket and sat at the light pretending to sooth it, a worn, beleaguered look on her face.

She usually brought in a hundred bucks or more a day doing that.

Doc never made that much. On a good day, he could make forty with the God loves you bit.

But he was having a much better day than usual. By noon, he'd made fifty bucks. Traffic was heavy and the lights were short, giving him plenty of time to walk up and down the rows.

It seemed like everybody was in a giving mood.

Later that afternoon a cop rolled up on Elizabeth's corner.

He must have been having a bad day, Doc figured, because he jumped out his car yelling, grabbed the doll from Elizabeth, and slapped its head against the curb until it broke apart in his hands.

There was chaos after that.

Cars swerved around the angry cop. One driver lost control, glanced off another car stopped at the light, and careened into the oncoming lanes, causing a six-car pile up that completely shut down the intersection.

Soon traffic was backed up for a mile in every direction. People were honking, and a few even got out of their cars to yell at the cop.

Most people were so pissed they made a point to stop and give Doc whatever change they had, just to spite the cop.

If it hadn't been for his itching, burning skin, which had been getting steadily worse all day, Doc might have felt vindicated for all those years of acting servile and beaten to every bully with a badge.

But the show ended eventually, and the intersection went back to normal. Doc patted his pockets, which were swollen with bills and coins and a pack of smokes some truck driver had given him, and he figured he'd done well enough for one day.

He asked Elizabeth if she wanted to join him for a beer and a hot dog, and together they walked up to the gas station at the next intersection.

"I heard about Jackson," she said to Doc as they sat under the awning of the gas station. "Carla told me."

"Yeah," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. Now that he was out of the intersection, his skin felt like it was on fire.

It started raining again.

"Any idea what it was?" she asked.

"No," he said. "I've never seen anything like it."

She nodded, drank some of her beer. "Do you think he was in pain?"

"Maybe," Doc said. "I don't know. It'd be a small mercy if he wasn't."

Elizabeth snorted at that. She was a junkie, twenty years on the horse. She fed her habit by turning tricks when the baby doll bit didn't pay, so she knew all about mercy. Knew about it the way a slave knows about freedom, as some impossibly cruel dream they beat you for having.

They stayed under the awning for a long time while Elizabeth drank the rest of her beer and Doc tried to soothe his burning skin.

Finally, feeling light-headed from the pain, he told Elizabeth he was going back to the bridge.

She smiled at him, and before he could ask her why, she stood up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

He looked at her with a curious smile. "What was that for?"

"Thanks," she said. Her smile was full of crooked and yellow teeth, but it was kind, and genuine. "You're a good man, Doc. Thanks for trying to help. Most people don't."

He nodded and stepped into the rain. To his surprise, he found the pain went away as soon as his skin got wet. It still itched, and it was raw to the touch, but it *did* feel better.

He walked back to the bridge, fully aware that something was wrong with him. His hands were bloated and unnaturally red, and the yellowish blisters he'd covered earlier with his sleeves had spread up his arms and were beginning to bubble across his neck.

He thought about going to the free hospital and having it checked out, but he was so very tired, and the thought of walking another three miles into downtown was just too much to ask of his worn out legs.

Instead, he went to the bridge, found a dry spot, and drifted off to sleep.

That night Doc had a strange and wonderful dream. He stood in a field beneath a blue and yellow banded sky and watched as the wind sent waves through tall green grass.

He felt warm, and complete, yet when he looked down, the body he had known for so long was gone. A thick, green woody bole, like bamboo, had replaced his legs and torso, and where there had once been arms and fingers, there were now round, moist leaves dancing in the breeze, soaking up the sun.

Everything was as it should be, and as he glanced along the field and the waves of grass, he knew the peace of a baby in his mother's arms.

This was home. He knew that on some deep subconscious level.

And then something changed. He felt himself rising into the air, his essence reduced to an iridescent membrane, like a soap bubble.

The waves of grass sank further and further away from him, until soon they were out of sight, part of the indistinct coloring of a planet shrinking into space.

He felt the searing cold and darkness of the long void, and the eons of sleep that followed.

He remembered waking beneath blue skies, with dry crumbling ground beneath him. It was a hard, cold land, but there was water, and iron enough in the soil for him to feed on.

This ground *could* be a home, though he knew he would always miss the blue and yellow skies of the birthing place.

Doc was slow to wake the next morning, and the dream still tasted sweet on his lips. It was difficult to open his eyes, and he couldn't feel his legs. But strangely, he felt very calm, very rested.

He lingered over the dream, and over his past. Doc had been alone, living on the road, for more than twenty years, and never in all that time had he felt such warmth, such joy. In his dream, he was clean, and the air in his lungs smelled sweet, like ozone.

Only when he tried to sit up and rub his eyes did he realize something was holding him to the ground. Slowly, with great difficulty, he pulled himself up and looked over his own body.

He had become a carpet of vines.

There were dozens of piles of vines just like him under the bridge. Dozens of dreamers.

His first impulse was to grab at the ropes and pull, but as he held them in his hands and caressed the hundreds of fig-like nodules, his belly began to warm as from a shot of whiskey. Warmth pulsed through his entire body, calming him, satisfying him.

He was thirsty, and he thought of the quiet black water of the nearby canal.

Doc got to his feet and shuffled into the sunlight. The familiar noises of cars rushing overhead were gone and all that remained was the soothing whistle of the wind through the grass.

He walked up to the edge of the freeway and looked south toward downtown. From where he stood, Doc could see far into the distance.

Huge tracts of the city were green. The green covered the roads and the houses and long, ropy lengths of it hung from the roofs of the skyscrapers.

He felt short of breath and clumsy, but at the same time he was immensely happy, for he knew the green was spreading.

Doc walked down the embankment, trailing his vines behind him.

Soon, he sensed, the nodules would spread their soap bubble seeds across the waiting earth.

He looked forward to that.

As he stepped into the still, black water of the canal he couldn't help but think of the day before and smile. It had been a wonderful day. So many lovely people had lent him a helping hand.

THE END

THE SACRED SIX-HUNDRED

DAVIN IRELAND

Somebody worked out that even if you could live forever it might still only be a day. Or a week or a month or a measly half-century, it really all depended. The point was, six-hundred years was pretty much the most a human being could expect before the law of averages won out and you walked under that bus you'd been dreading, or got vaporized in a mid-air collision because some knuckle-head down at ATC broke up with his girlfriend the night before and couldn't keep his mind on the job.

People still did it, though. Radically extended lifespans were the rule, not the exception. Take Ralph Burchester. Ralph had made it all the way to the eve of the Sacred Six-Hundred, and had the scars to prove it. Trouble was, he was fed up of telling people his war stories—especially in an age when war (or any other form of violent conflict, for that matter) was no longer permitted. No, sir, go tell it to somebody who gives a damn.

As Ralph sat on his front porch with a beer in his hand and a lighted Chesterfield stuck to his bottom lip (what the hell, lungs were a dime a dozen these days anyhow), he watched the coruscating sun wink through the leaves of his bottlebrush tree and knew not only that he would die soon, but that (more importantly, perhaps) a spot of rain was on the way.

He wasn't the only one to sense the change. Up and down the little suburban cul-de-sac where Ralph lived with his wife, men and women of a certain age were struggling across scrupulously-manicured lawns to take in their washing ahead of the downpour. Just like Ralph they felt it in their bones. Walter Snape from across the road (380 yrs) was on his ninth hip replacement and often claimed he would be into double figures by the time he bowled his fourth century. Katie Elders (511 yrs), chairperson of the Mulberry Road tenants' association, had worked the majority of her life as a diving instructor in various exotic locations around the globe. She had been mauled by sharks and chopped by outboard motors so many times that her torso contained more stitch marks than a second-hand patchwork quilt. Maybe she sensed the impending climatological change more than most, but in truth they *all* felt the impending bad weather somewhere in their atrophied frames.

Perhaps that was the real irony of an age in which you could buy cloned replacement body parts for next to nothing. If a troublesome limb got mutilated, detached, disfigured beyond repair, or just plain worn out, all you did was dial the surgical equivalent of the pizza delivery guy and *bam*—cash or credit card payments, please, no cheques allowed. So the technology existed yet still folk experienced a familiar ache in the bones when the air pressure dropped and storm clouds gathered on the other side of the horizon.

Except, of course, it wasn't only limbs that were expendable. These days you could buy whole racks of surrogate eyeballs as easily as purchasing a dozen eggs at the corner shop, or treat yourself to a few hundred yards

of replacement skin as quickly and conveniently as buying a roll of wallpaper from the local hardware supply store. It was quite the done thing.

Like anybody else, Ralph had indulged himself a few times over the years. In fact, as he lifted another beer from the cooler next to his La-Z-Boy (the ice cubes had melted, he noted sourly, another of nature's marvels nobody had gotten round to fixing yet), he wondered just how much of him was still, well, *him*. It was like young Jimmy Jacobs (291 yrs) from the Brompton Street card school was so fond of telling him. You buy yourself a classic car, first thing you do is replace that dodgy rear axle, right? Maybe substitute the brake pads, change the oil, even get yourself a new set of wheels to spruce the whole thing up. And all of that's *before* you drive it away. Forty or fifty years down the line and that bodywork ain't looking too hot, neither. So you change all of that as well, okay? Another hundred years on and the only thing left of the original model is the tailpipe. So after all that time is it the same old car or just the same old tailpipe?

It was at times like this that Ralph would sneak an extra card from the bottom of the deck and wink at old man Livermore (a statistical anomaly at 602 years of age). Naturally, everybody appreciated Jimmy's point of view. After all, the elusive conundrum of identity and the ongoing search for self were as relevant today as they ever had been. Unfortunately, Ralph just didn't see it that way. He was tired of the centuries-long inactivity, of the never-ending quest for new and exciting ways to spend one's leisure time, of the same old crap on TV. But most of all, more than anything else, Ralph was tired of arguing. As he levered himself out of the recliner and hauled the cooler indoors for more ice, he realised that he was tired of Jimmy as well. Tired of his smart mouth and inflated opinions.

Ralph felt himself getting all worked up again but could do nothing about it. The thing about Jimmy was that his greatest problem also happened to be his most admirable asset: his patriotism. He still passionately believed in such antiquated notions as the nation state and democratic rule. To hell with all of that, Ralph thought bitterly. He had seen so many governments rise and fall in his time, seen so many politicians elected on promises of change only to have them resign in disgrace before their term of office had elapsed, that he now preferred to leave the decision-making to the underground Artillects who knew how to handle that kind of thing best. Okay, so they weren't infallible, despite what people said. They were clumsy and they broke stuff, and because they were prevented by law from acquiring higher intelligence levels than their human counterparts, their judgement was often unreliable. But they *did* perform all of the heavy labour in the world, and could still be switched off any time the people wanted. That had been proved on numerous occasions, so why worry? With a thousand years of peaceful Artillect rule behind them, *something* must be going right.

Indoors the house was filled with shadows and silence. Dolores was in the lounge watching daytime soap operas the way she'd been doing for the last two hundred years without respite. That woman goes through cataracts the way some people wear out toothbrushes, Ralph thought

to himself. He fondly shook his head as he opened the ice box and cracked a fresh set of cubes into the cooler at his feet. He couldn't for the life of him imagine why they still called the damn things 'daytime' soap operas anyway. *Days of Our Lives*, *Melrose Place*, *The Bold and the Beautiful*—Jesus Christ, that crap ran 24/7 every single day of the year, new episodes during prime time, old episodes—entire seasons of old episodes, no less—at every other time. And Dolores never missed a minute. The poor woman needed help.

Ralph scooped a fresh six-pack from the fridge and glanced at the clock on the wall. Another half-hour before he started work. Just enough time for one more beer. He broke cans from the plastic collar and scrunched them into the cubes. Before running the cooler back outside, he stuck his head into the lounge and checked that everything was okay.

Nothing seemed out of place. Wallpaper bathed in ghostly blue television light, constantly shifting images snapping an array of flitting shadows from the couch and the refreshments trolley. Ralph crossed the room as quietly as he could. Dolores's cardiac meter blipped silently on the dresser. Her vitamin D injection was prepped and ready to go (no time to venture outside for *real* sunshine, she might miss an important development on *ATWT*). Her other medicines were stacked up for use during the commercial break, *if* one ever came along again. Those things were becoming alarmingly scarce of late, Ralph had noticed. After a moment's debate, he picked up the squeeze bottle of saline solution that stood next to the cardiac meter and leaned over his wife's shoulder. The scene on TV reflected perfectly in her dilated pupils. Ralph squeezed the saline into first one eye, then the other. Dolores blinked once in acknowledgement of his act, a second time when the telephone rang.

Ralph returned the saline to the dresser and shuffled through to the wall-phone in the kitchen.

"Y'ello." He fished a beer from amongst the cubes, the receiver lodged in the crook of his shoulder.

"Hi, it's me, it's *me*," cried an enthusiastic voice, "the birthday girl is in town!"

Ralph cracked open the tin, frowning. "Which birthday girl is that?" he said, taking the first chilled draught of beer.

"Why, *me*, Daddy!" snapped the woman's voice, suddenly becoming irate, "Dan? Your *daughter*?"

I have a daughter called Dan? Ralph thought. He squinted at the wall-calendar above the fridge. Every single day this month had at least one name scribbled into its corresponding date square, and some had multiples. He ran his finger along the numbers, grubbing for the memory. Dan, Dan, Dan. He found what he was looking for just as the voice at the other end of the line began *helloing* him persistently.

"Oh, *Daniella*," he said. "Baby girl, you had an old man confused there for a minute. You didn't think I'd forget my eleventh daughter's birthday, now, did you?"

"Twenty-ninth daughter, Daddy," pouted the voice, "twenty-ninth."

"Ha! Got you again," he laughed, furiously erasing the 11 with his finger and using the magnetic marker stuck to the fridge door to jot a quick 29 in its place. He followed this up with a row of spiny exclamation marks. He would have to talk to Dolores about this. *She* was the one who took care of family stuff, not him. Meanwhile the voice had said something else and he had missed it. He snatched up the Insta-Static from the shelf and gave the mouthpiece a quick blast.

"Ooh, I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said, "but the line's terrible today. Could you repeat that for me, please?"

"I said," she said, sounding mildly suspicious, "'then how *old* am I?'"

"What is this munchkin, twenty questions?"

"I'm waiting." He could hear an impatient foot tapping somewhere in electric space ... or whatever the hell space it was on the telephone these days. He gave the calendar a baleful glare and closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb. "Er, one-hundred-and-seventy-nine years young," he said as brightly as he could.

"*Daddy!*" squealed the voice, "you remembered!"

Immediate, overwhelming relief. He held the icy can to his forehead and drew a deep breath. "Hey, how could I forget my little princess's special day, huh? We got you a present and everything."

"You did?"

"Uh-huh." Ralph returned the Insta-Static to the shelf and picked up a rack of bulk-buy watches (for the boys) and bulk-buy pendants (for the girls) that stood next to it. There were only three of the original thirty-two pendants left. All of them were identical, right down the engraving on the inside: *To our favourite little girl, love Mom & Pop*. Each had its own pre-addressed, padded envelope waiting for it. That was a major drawback of living such a long time. Too many kids by far. And you can forget about grandkids. The average family's combined annual birthday outlay could bankrupt a developing nation five times over. The voice was helloing him again between requests for information about the gift.

"It's something unique and very special to you," he said, and swiped the Insta-Static from the shelf once more. This was going to be a long day indeed.

At ten minutes to four that afternoon, Ralph Burchester made his way down Mulberry Road at a respectable half-mile-an-hour hobble, leaning more heavily on his cane than usual due to the excess energy he had expended on his twenty-ninth daughter's birthday celebrations-by-proxy. He passed Mr Duchamps, who stood watering his front lawn with a green plastic watering can, and doffed his hat.

"Whatsa matter, Floyd," Ralph yelled, grinning in the glorious Florida sunshine, "that old hose of yours got prostate trouble again?"

Floyd Duchamps looked up from what he was doing and waved. "Hey, Burchester, the day I get prostate trouble," he retorted heartily, "is the day that lady wife of yours stops gettin' any, you hear me?"

"I hear ya," said Ralph, resting his hand on the gate and chuckling, "and fuck you, too. So you coming to work any time soon or what?"

"Nah." Floyd pushed his chequered flat-cap back an inch or two on his wrinkled-walnut forehead and squinted at the bright sun. "Thought I'd take the day off again, do a few things around the house." He threw the watering can a look and shrugged guiltily. "This way it lasts a little longer, you know?"

"Sure, sure I do." Ralph thought about the time he had reshingled the driveway one plastic beaker at a time. It had taken him a whole month just to do the first six feet. "Well, I better be getting along," he said, "time waits for no man. Oh, and by the way ..." He waited until Floyd had stooped to pick up his watering can again. "Gonna rain soon, buddy."

Ralph made it into his place of work (which was a little red-brick building at the end of the street) on the stroke of the appointed hour, then spent the next fifteen minutes drinking coffee in the staff communal room and swapping stories with his male colleagues, some of whom had been at the company for centuries.

"So what's new?" he said to the supervisor, finally settling into his seat at twenty minutes past four exactly. "We hear about that new contract yet or what?"

As usual, Mrs Leonora peered at him over the top of her wing-framed spectacles before answering; and then, as was equally usual, she switched her gaze to the clock on the wall.

"Quite frankly I'm amazed we get any contracts at all, Mr Burchester, considering the level of tardiness prevailing in the office at the present time."

"Can I take that as a 'no', then?"

Mrs Leonora pulled off her bifocals (always the next step in her sliding scale of disapproval) and folded them in her liver-spotted hands. "May I remind you, Mr Burchester, that it is twenty minutes past the hour and you have done no work at all."

Ralph looked around the near-empty office and held up his hands. "Hey who the hell cares," he said, "there isn't anything to do around here anyway. Never has been."

"That is hardly the point. Benthem & Co pays you a salary and expects something in return." She picked up a lime-green pen and tapped it against a stack of insurance forms that had been earmarked for disposal. "We work a full two-hour week here, Mr Burchester, and that means forty minutes each and every day you are on these premises. Deviation from this pattern will be duly noted. Do I make myself clear?"

"So quit moaning and find me something to do," Ralph retorted, starting to wish he had followed Floyd Duchamps' example and taken the day off.

"You could always send a gentle reminder to Mr Davies at Morley & Sons. We still haven't received confirmation of that order yet."

"Then that's what I'll do," said Ralph, opening his e-comm software. And thus ended the daily exchange between the two erudite colleagues. Before writing the

reminder, Ralph perused the list of reminders already sent to his counterpart at Morley. All 698 of them. Each contained an identical text, the only difference being the date.

Dear Mr Davies,

Allow me to express my gratitude for the timely reply that greeted my previous query. I am now sending you this supplementary note as a further reminder of the verbal commitment ...

It never changed. Ralph copied the text and sent the email, knowing full well that he would receive an equally polite reply—but no decision—sometime in the next twenty-four hours. "Job done," he said, struggling up from his chair, "and now I'm pooped." He stretched his weary limbs and gazed at the clock.

"That won't make it go any faster, Ralph," Mrs Leonora reminded him.

"No kidding?" he said, "are you sure?" and limped off in the direction of the rec room. "By the way, I'm going for a cigarette and more coffee. You want me to bring you back a cup?"

Mrs Leonora's glasses were back on and she examined him once more over the top of them. "Will it still be warm by the time it gets here?"

"Hard to say," said Ralph. "Will you?"

When the whistle blew at twenty-to-five that afternoon, two dozen men and women of exceedingly advanced years limped through Benthem's front gates and slow-motion scattered in the direction of their gated-community homes. There were a number of exceptions, of course. Ralph Burchester met his close friend, neighbour and colleague, Floyd Duchamps halfway along Mulberry Road, and together they pottered on towards the diner across the park where the Brompton Street card school met each weekday afternoon.

All of the gang were there. Tommy Kagen, a whipper-snapper at just eighty years of age, was busy shuffling the deck with the same pair of hands he was born with (or so he liked to brag); Bob van Kerkhof, a respectable three-hundred plusser, repeatedly soured the air with his perpetual complaints about today's special, New England Clam Chowder, which had been the special for as long as anybody could remember—and that included old man Livermore, who sat at one end of the table looking decidedly glum. He had yet to take off his jacket or discard his olive-green fedora, which was pulled so far down over his eyes that he could phase in and out of sleep without anybody noticing. And then, last but not least, was good old Jimmy Jacobs and his raft of worldly opinions. Jimmy was accompanied, Ralph noted with a degree of surprise, by a stranger in a plaid cotton shirt and canary-coloured golfing trousers.

"Hey, look who it iiiiiis," cried Jimmy, "the Mulberry Road boys. Come in, guys, come in. Pull up a pew, I've got somebody I'd like you to meet."

Ralph and Floyd did as requested, relieved to be taking the weight off their feet. "Okay, we sit" said the former, nodding at the unfamiliar face across the table. "So who's the new guy?"

"Allow me to introduce Clifford Paine from across town," said Jimmy. "Cliff to his friends. He's come here today because there's something he'd like to speak to us about, and I for one think we should listen."

"Okay, what's it about?"

"Well, see, he's got this theory," said Jimmy, "about how the—"

But that was as far as he got.

"Always with the theories!" Ralph protested, "how many times do I have to tell you people, I don't care who shot Kennedy or which subterranean lab is supposed to be manufacturing—"

"Will you just shut up for once in your goddamn life!" shouted Jimmy, banging the table with a fist that he immediately clutched, howling. "Look what you made me do now!" he yelled, cradling one arthritic hand in his lap, "I'm gonna be up all night with this! I got osteoporosis and everything!"

The rest of the table winced, knowing only too well the kind of pain Jimmy would be going through.

"You should try and calm down more," interjected Tommy Kagen, picking up his cards and shuffling them some more, "be more like Ralph, maybe."

"Just let the man tell his story, all right?" Grimacing and flexing his fingers, Jimmy looked at each of the faces in turn, ending on Ralph's. "He's come a long way, you know? We could at least show some respect."

Ralph let out a disgusted breath and signalled for the waitress. Her name was Lola Tavernini and she was dressed like a refugee from a *Laverne & Shirley* re-run. She and Ralph had dated as teenagers, married briefly in their seventies (a case of youthful over-exuberance, both had since acknowledged), and engaged in a number of extra-marital affairs ever since. It was nothing out of the ordinary. Every man in the neighbourhood had been involved with just about every woman in the neighbourhood at some point in his life, and the women had done more or less the same with most of the men. Despite her advanced years, Lola wore a predominantly pink outfit to match the colour of her bubble-gum and heavily lacquered nails. She was considered quite a fox by those in the know.

"What'll it be big boy," she said, "and make it snappy, I get off shift in another nine minutes and I got a hot date waitin' for me at the bowlin' green."

Ralph threw up his hands in exasperation. "What are you talking about, 'date at the bowling green'? You only just got here."

"Hey," Lola protested, tapping Ralph on his thinning crown with her felt-tip pen, "I work the full forty minutes a day same as everybody else around here, so stop bustin' my nuts, Burchester. You want me to stay a little longer, start tippin' me better." She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted: "You hear that, mister cheapskate? Now let's go, what'll it be?"

Ralph gazed glumly at the chalked drinks board.

"Root beer," he muttered, suitably castigated.

"Any of you dummies want something different, speak up now or forever hold your peace." Lola waited exactly one second for an answer. "Six root beers comin' up," she said, not without a trace of satisfaction.

When everybody had a beverage in front of him and Lola had retired to her customary position by the soda fountain, Jimmy said, "I do believe our friend Mr Paine here has the floor. So, Cliff, when you're ready?"

The man called Clifford Paine coughed and peered at the group. "It's the machines," he declared without any further explanation. And sat there peering at them.

"Is that it?" asked Tommy.

"That's it."

Ralph cast a sly look at Floyd. "So we got plenty of machines," he observed, "which ones did you have in mind? Rototillers? Coffee percolators? Microwave ovens? Those robots that spray the extra vitamins on cereals, what?"

"No, no, no," said Paine, exasperatedly pointing at the floor, "I mean clever machines. The ones down *there*. Beneath the Earth."

"Oh, you mean the Artillects," said Ralph. "Weeeeell, it doesn't surprise me. A guy has a theory these days, it has to do with the Arties. So what is it this time? They're down there amassing a cyborg army to come up here and kick our butts all over town? Couldn't they have done that any time in the last thousand years instead of expending all of their energies producing what we need?" He took a swig of his root beer and smacked his lips. "Have you any idea how busy they are down there?"

"As a matter of fact," said Clifford Paine, "I do. I've been underground myself. And you're right, they *are* busy. Busy as hell."

Five pairs of eyes widened in astonishment. Ralph sat back and whistled through his teeth. Even Jimmy looked surprised.

"Is this for real," he said, once they had all taken the chance to digest the outrageous claim.

"Sure," said Paine, "in the interests of continuing good relations between ourselves and our hardwired 'facilitators', the Artilect hierarchy invited a bunch of us down below to look around and check that nothing untoward was, shall we say, 'developing'?"

"A-ha!" Jimmy made to bang the table with his fist again, but thought better of it. "And when you went down there you found something that bothered you, right?" His grey eyebrows sailed up on his forehead like a pair of gulls riding a coastal thermal.

"Hell, no," Paine replied, "that's just the point. I found everything to be exactly the way it should be. Artilect civilisation is geared solely to the production of that which is required and the studious conservation of everything else." He sighed wistfully. "It's a thing of real beauty, gentlemen. But that's the problem. I think I finally figured out what's going on."

In spite of the proclaimed lack of interest from certain quarters of the table, five heads leaned inwards to form a huddle.

"And that is?" enquired Jimmy.

"Put it this way," Paine murmured, "you remember the stories of the old days, when the Arties first came along? What did people all really *want* back then?"

"To live longer, better lives?" whispered Floyd.

"To work fewer hours for more pay," chipped in Tommy.

"To have as much free time as possible," added Ralph, "and a higher standard of living."

"And what did they give us? *All* of that stuff. On a platter, as fast as they could. And you know why?"

Tommy shook his head. "Because we *told* 'em to?"

"Wrong." Paine tapped a demonstrative finger on the scarred table-top. "Because it was the best demographic indicator available at the time. And you know what, it still is."

Jimmy looked confused. "Demographic indicator of what, Cliff, I don't get it."

"Of the innate rebel instinct in mankind, of course. Look," he said, "you make human beings immortal, or as close to immortal as dammit. That's the first step. Next you make work all but obsolete, and in its place you give the people Minnesota whist and dominoes and as much TV as they can stand, right? Finally you parcel up the citizenry into neat, self-regulating communities, send their kids off to school until they're as old and decrepit as their parents, and then you sit back and you *watch*."

"Watch for what?" said Ralph, growing slightly less comfortable.

"Have you been listening to a word I've said? For *rebels*, damn it. Revolutionaries, subversives, trouble-makers. Anybody with a unique voice. Let me ask you a question. Do you have employee records where you work? Personnel files, that kind of thing?"

"Only about *this* thick," said Ralph, holding his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart.

"Ever show one of those files to an Artie before?"

"Hell, no, that stuff doesn't concern them. That's people business. Besides, they wouldn't be interested in that kind of thing."

"Is that a fact?" Paine wet his lips on his root beer and narrowed his eyes. "Anything ever break where you work, Ralph? Anything mechanical, electrical?"

"Sure," said Ralph, "all the time. Just the other day the fire alarm got busted and they had to send up a monitor droid in the middle of the night to—" He stopped talking and swallowed awkwardly. "Hey, wait a minute," he said.

"Exactly," said Paine, "in the middle of the night the Arties send up a droid to perform the necessary repairs while everybody else is in bed. Nice and convenient, huh? You ever stop to think what *else* it might be doing while you're asleep?" He looked from one face to the other and then dropped his gaze to his soda. When he spoke again, his tone was solemn, guarded. "They identify the rebels at an early age, gentlemen. They know who makes waves. They also know who the conformists are." He

looked Ralph square in the eye. "You think of yourself as a rebel, Ralph?"

Ralph shrugged. "My supervisor says I drink too much coffee, but I don't think that really counts."

"How many kids you got?"

"Kids? Fifty, sixty, I'd have to look it up. Why?"

"Well, let's see." Paine turned to Jimmy. "How 'bout you, Jimbo? Company man? You tow the line?"

Jimmy snorted and gulped back a mouthful of his drink. "No, I wouldn't say that exactly."

This elicited a series of knowing chuckles from the group.

"How many kids, Jimmy? I'm guessing none, right?"

Jimmy fiddled awkwardly with his coaster. "I—I'm sterile, Cliff. Everyone around here knows that."

"How about the rest of you guys? Anybody else plan on changing the world sometime soon?"

There were a few mumblings under the breath but nothing overt. Paine leaned back in his chair. "And I bet you've all got large families, too." He turned to face the counter. "How about you, Lola, you ever rebel against anything?"

Lola snapped her gum as she pulled a light cotton summer jacket over her uniform. "Honey," she informed him, "I never stopped."

"So you a mom yet or what?"

She walked sedately in the direction of the door before turning to address him. "That's none of your damn business," she said, "so don't ask."

When she was gone, Jimmy and Ralph shook their heads at the same time. "Got her tubes all tangled up when she was a teenager," said the latter, "but I think we get the message here."

"I certainly hope so," said Paine. "'cause it's the future of mankind we're discussing here. A good citizen like Ralph gets to father dozens and dozens of kids, whereas a thorn in the side of the establishment—even a minor thorn like Jimmy or Lola, no disrespect intended—is excluded from procreation." He effected a casual shrug. "We're being bred for compliance, gentlemen. It's the only reasonable answer."

In his mind's eye, Ralph saw an image of Dolores paralysed in front of the TV set. At the same time, he began to experience a form of dread he had not felt in aeons. "You mean, like, a complacency gene?"

Paine didn't even bother to nod. He simply observed that a vasectomy/ovariectomy could be performed during a routine operation such as a tonsillectomy, and nobody would be any the wiser.

The men pulled back from the huddle one at a time and thought about this. Finally, Tommy Kagen, who had long quit shuffling his deck of cards, said: "Kinda seems the long way round, though, you know? Nearly a thousand years of doing what we want them to do when they could have finished us off with a super-bomb or a virus any time they liked."

"That's a good point," said Paine, "but ultimately naïve." He drained the dregs from the bottle and rubbed his hands together. "Look," he said, "the first thing we need to remember is that the Arties don't see time the way we do. We make it to the Sacred Six-Hundred and we feel like it's a real achievement. To them six-hundred years is a drip in the bucket. Secondly, they won't risk a war for two important reasons. One, if we found out about their plans ahead of time, there'd be one hell of an uprising, and they wouldn't want that. Two, every single human being who survived a potential conflict would be hell-bent on destroying the Arties thereafter. And don't forget, they have an Intelligence Quotient no higher than our own. So no, the long way round as Tommy puts it, is also the *easy* way round. Give us everything we want, breed us for lethargy and indifference. Weed out the rebels and the innovative thinkers. That way they won't *have* to kill us off. Another thousand years and we'll all just die out of our own accord."

"Mary Mother of God," said Tommy, "I never thought of it that way before." He squashed the deck in his fist and looked around the group, eyes wild. "We gotta do something about this, fellas."

After a pause, Both Jimmy and Ralph nodded. Then they sighed in tandem. "What the hell are we gonna do against an army of tin heads?"

"Now?" said Paine. "Nothing at all. Go home, sleep on it, get some sun. I'm not saying the Arties are watching us this very minute, but from what Jimmy tells me, you guys come in here every weekday to shoot the breeze and play cards for an hour or so, am I right?" He consulted his watch. "The hour's nearly up for today. I say we stick to the normal routine and meet back here tomorrow afternoon at the same time. Agreed?"

Everybody agreed. But still Ralph was unconvinced.

"I honestly don't see what we can do," he said.

Paine looked unamused. "Tell me this. What is the one thing old folk do the whole day long?"

Ralph nodded and climbed out of his chair. "I get it," he said, "bitch, moan, complain, gossip, reminisce. We talk. You want us to spread the word, right?"

Paine agreed that it was, and the meeting ended just as the first drops of rain spatted against the diner window.

It turned out to be the longest night of Ralph's life. The minute hand crawled round the clock as if it were a mortally wounded animal, and by two A.M. he found himself actually glad to be packaging up the next day's birthday gifts with a shot of Jim Bean at his elbow. It was a bumper crop: two pendants and a watch. The faces that went with the name's of these seldom-seen children (or maybe they were grandchildren by now, Ralph didn't know anymore) escaped him. When he still couldn't sleep he wandered into the lounge and flopped next to Dolores on the couch. Her hand had come to rest halfway between her mouth and the little box of candies on her lap. Gently, Ralph cradled her wrist and pushed it in the direction of her half-opened lips. Dolores didn't even blink this time. Her jaws simply began their rhythmic

work, dutifully rotating like a washing machine on the spin cycle.

Catatonia, Ralph thought, *the final retreat of the terminally bored*. A once-common problem, it had now become a rampant epidemic. He resolved to do something about this, too, just as soon as he and the rest of the boys got to the bottom of this new Artie conspiracy—the first he had ever really believed in.

When his eyes fluttered open at six A.M. that same morning it was as if he had merely blinked a long blink. Brilliant August sunlight lanced through a gap in the drapes, pre-recorded birdsong piped from beneath the eaves. It was his birthday. After a solitary breakfast on the back porch, Ralph cleaned the family car, which had stood idle in the garage for close to a century now, then sneaked Dolores's nutrition pills and vitamin D injection in-between a wafer-thin commercial break. When he finally strolled down Mulberry Road to collect Floyd Duchamps, it was in the knowledge that he was doing everything he could to ignore the knot of excitement tightening in his belly.

He worked steadily from the stroke of the hour that afternoon right up until the sound of the whistle forty minutes later. For most of that time Mrs Leonora sat opposite him holding her wing-framed glasses in her hands and staring in wonderment at the brisk, purposeful way he sharpened pencils and arranged stray paperclips. A late surge for Employee of the Month, maybe.

Whatever his motivation, Ralph was out from behind his desk and hot-footing it down the hall to meet Floyd the moment the wall-clock buzzed the end of the working day. Together the two men made their way over to Brompton Street, cheerfully swapping stories about lack of sleep and the strange ideas that had come to them in the dead of night. It was Floyd who saw the change first so it was Floyd who pulled up short, suddenly grabbing Ralph by the sleeve with his wrinkled hands.

"Look," he gasped, jutting his chin in the direction of the diner. Ralph looked. The windows of the little grey-brick building were all boarded up. Joe Roscoe, who held the dubious honour of being both the establishment's owner *and* its resident bus boy, sat on the steps next to a bored-looking Lola Tavernini. Lola sat there smoking and snapping her gum as Joe complained loudly and most probably not for the first time that they just couldn't do this to him. To his rear, the doors had been secured to their frames with big galvanised nails. A sign written in red paint that ran like fresh blood hung on the doorknob. *Permanently closed for business*, it read.

"What the hell happened here?" said Ralph, crossing the front lot at an ever-decreasing pace. The strength was running out of his legs with each new step.

Joe offered him an embittered look and shook his head. "You can read what it says on the door, can't ya?"

"Sure, but *why*?"

"It's the gov'mint. Said I was running a brothel down here instead of an eatery. Said I was 'lowering the tone'. Can you believe that?"

"A brothel?" Ralph looked at Lola and then back at Joe. "Are you kiddin' me? We play canasta over here, goddammit."

Joe just shook his head again and ran his hands through his dyed hair. "You try telling the Arties that."

At the mention of the word, Floyd and Ralph shuffled forward.

"You had *Arties* here?" Ralph felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

"Two of 'em," Joe complained, "the new kind, the tin heads. They asked me a bunch of questions and then they took Jimmy."

"Jimmy? *Gone*?"

At this, Lola pulled a strand of gum from her mouth with one bright fingernail, then chewed it all the way back. "Only for today, they said. Guess that's more than poor old Mr Paine can expect."

Ralph experienced a sinking sensation he had last felt three-hundred years before on an aeroplane that had plummeted a thousand feet in mid-air for no apparent reason. "What happened to him?" he asked, knowing even before Joe opened his mouth that it no longer mattered. Clifford Paine was dead—even if he was still alive.

"Bus got him." said Joe.

"A bus? How the hell could *that* have happened?" objected Floyd, "I haven't seen a bus around here for fifty years. And you're telling me the first one comes along gets Cliff? It's a joke, right? It *hasta* be."

Joe craned his neck to contemplate the bloody, streaked letters of the sign. "If only," he said. And then he picked up the jacket that lay next to him on the step and helped Lola to her feet. "Come on, sweet cheeks," he mumbled, "let's get you home before anything else bad happens."

They left Ralph and Floyd to contemplate the darkened building alone.

It took them longer than usual to get home. Ralph didn't seem to have any puff left, and Floyd's distraught tears slowed them down even more. By the time Ralph pushed through his front gate, dusk had softened the world about him with soothing lavenders and dull greys. It failed to occur to him that this was the middle of August and that the sun usually burned bright in the sky till way past ten.

"Dolores, I'm home," he said, "time for your medication." He trudged into the parlour still using his cane for support and said: "You'll never guess what happened to me today."

Dolores didn't answer. The Artie sitting on the sofa beside her—a two-metre service droid of slender build and no distinguishable features—rotated its head to observe Ralph's entrance. Then it rose slowly to its full height and bowed in deference to accepted human superiority. Servo motors whirred and computer circuitry hummed.

"Mr Burchester," buzzed its synthesised sycophant voice, "how delightful to see you again. Please, *do* tell us."

Ralph eased himself forward on the cane and cast a worried look at his wife. "Tell you what?" he said distractedly.

The Artie effected a humanoid shrug and replayed a recording of what Ralph had said on entering the parlour.

Dolores, I'm home, he heard himself call, *time for your medicine*. Then, after a gap: *You'll never guess what happened to me today*.

"So what did you see today?" said the Artie, and strode in fluid steps to the liquor cabinet. "Whiskey?" it added.

"With ice," said Ralph. "Is Dolores okay?"

"Very much so," said the Artie, "better than ever, in fact." It placed the drink on a side table and gestured for Ralph to drink. More circuitry hummed. Then it requested once more that he explain himself.

"Er," said Ralph, gulping a mouthful of Jim Bean. He felt the sweat break out in dots on his forehead. They were going to take him away, too. Blast that Clifford Paine and his wild ideas. "Well," he said, "I, uh, got up and went to work and almost, er ... forgot."

"What did you forget?" The Artie's slender metallic face was featureless, yet it appeared to frown.

"That it's ... my birthday today," said Ralph in a moment of inspiration. "The Sacred Six-Hundred. I finally made it."

The Artie's face didn't move. "Congratulations, Mr Burchester. Your wife has a wonderful gift for you."

Ralph felt his throat go dry and scratchy. "She does?"

At that moment, Dolores, looking as clear-eyed and beautiful as she had done at any time in her life, turned to face him. Her eyes shone with newfound emotion and her bottom lip quivered in maternal anticipation. "We're going to have another baby," she sighed, "isn't that wonderful?"

Ralph knocked back the rest of his Scotch and gestured for his glass to be refilled. "That's just great," he squeaked, and after a moment took his place on the couch beside his wife. The Artie bowed once more and left the house without another word. On the TV, *The Young and the Restless* played endlessly, endlessly, with the sound turned down.

Thank God everything was back to normal.

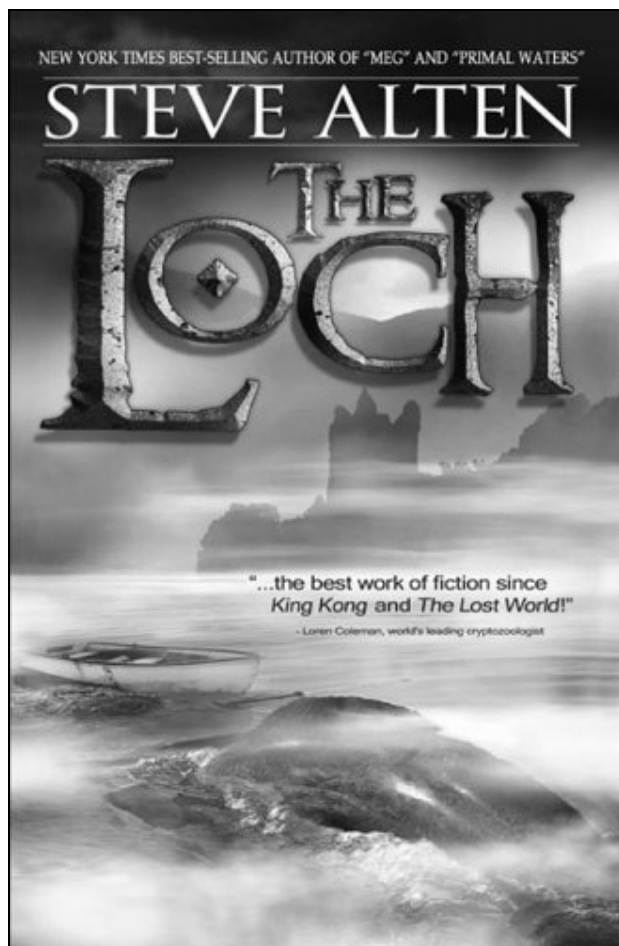
THE END

BOOK REVIEWS BY JASON BRANNON

THE LOCH BY STEVE ALTON

Publisher: Tsunami Books

Available at: www.amazon.com



Mention the word 'cryptid' and a whole host of creatures comes to mind: Bigfoot, El Chupacabra, The Jersey Devil, The Beast of Exmoor, The Mothman. Yet no creature embodies the idea of mythic animals inhabiting our world more than The Loch Ness Monster. A novel about such a creature could quickly descend into disposable prose on par with articles in The Weekly World News. Thankfully Steve Alten's *The Loch* treated the subject matter as much more than just another monster story.

I was already a fan of Steve Alten after being hooked by his debut novel, *Meg*, and had hopes that he would do something interesting with the folklore of Nessie. Not only did he pose a credible theory about the nature of the beast, but he took me on a tour of Loch Ness that made me feel like I was actually visiting Scotland on a fact-finding mission. One of the things I liked best about *The Loch* was the skillful weaving of subplots into The Loch Ness Monster mythology: the tale explored Nessie's true identity, the Templar Knights, the geneological lineage of Sir William Wallace, and Scottish Highland

clans all while providing a fascinating look into the dark waters of Loch Ness. It also explored the journey of a man trying to overcome his psychological childhood demons while facing the even-deadlier threat that lives in the water.

The story centers around Zachary Wallace, a marine biologist summoned back to Scotland by his father, Angus, who is on trial for the murder of a business associate that fell to his demise in the frigid waters of Loch Ness. Angus claims that Nessie was to blame for the man's death while prosecution asserts that Angus himself was to blame. Zachary is the only one who can prove that something undiscovered by science lives in the Loch, and his findings will either substantiate his father's story or potentially get him the death penalty. The fact that he and his philandering father have avoided each other for the past seventeen years doesn't make his decision to cooperate any easier.

On the surface this might seem like the literary equivalent of a creature feature as Wallace hunts for whatever is responsible for several recent deaths in *The Loch*, but Alten dives deep into the subject matter and into the history of the area while throwing in some science for good measure. His characters act and behave like living, breathing people rather than cardboard cutouts, and he manages to make unlikeable people (like Angus Wallace) likeable and even heroic.

There are enough mysteries in *The Loch* for lovers of suspense (like the true origin of the creature and the hidden motives of a sect of the Templar called the Black Knights). and enough carnage for lovers of horror. Adventure enthusiasts will find more than their fair share of action, and scholarly types will delight in a crash course on Scottish history and geography. Steve Alten gets better and better with each new book, and this is proof positive.

Highly recommended.

JASON BRANNON is the author of over 120 published short stories, four short story collections, two novels, and three chapbooks. His writing has appeared in such diverse publications as *Dark Realms*, *The Edge*, *Wicked Hollow*, *Black Petals*, *Rogue Worlds*, and *Dark Karma*.



Author's Web Site: <http://www.jbrannon.net/>

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

IAN SIMMONS has been a freelance illustrator for 15 years and has created illustrations for countless books, magazines, graphic novels, advertisements, and web sites. He combines a vast range of techniques, both traditional and digital, to create images for any project. He prides himself on the fact that he's never missed a deadline or delivered over budget. Ian can be contacted at www.portfolios.com/IanSimmons.

DONNA TAYLOR BURGESS free lances as a writer-poet-illustrator for genre and mainstream publications such as *Strange Horizons*, *Flashquake*, *Story House*, *Vestal Review*, *Flash Me Magazine*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Dreams & Nightmares*, *The Fortean Bureau*, *Flesh & Blood*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *The Magazine of Speculative Poetry*, and the anthologies, *HIGH FANTASTIC* and *NEBULA ANTHOLOGY 32*. She edits a column for the HWA Newsletter, "Blood & Spades: Poets of the Dark Side." She is the editor of *Star*Line*, Digest of the SF Poetry Association.

LIDA BROADHURST work has appeared in *Surreal*, *Mythic Delirium*, *Nemonymous #1*, *Star*Line*, and many other publications. Her poetry chapbook, *INTO THE BEAUTIFUL MAZE*, was a Stoker preliminary nomination. A poem from that chapbook won an Honorable Mention in YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR.

JAMES S. DORR new short fiction and poetry collection, *DARKER LOVES: TALES OF MYSTERY AND REGRET*, is due out from Dark Regions Press (www.darkregions.com) as a companion to his current collection, *STRANGE MISTRESSES: TALES OF WONDER AND ROMANCE* (Dark Regions, 2001). An Indiana resident, Dorr is a member of the Science Fiction Poetry Association and a multi-time Rhysling finalist as well as an active member of SFWA and HWA, and has had work listed in THE YEAR'S BEST FANTASY AND HORROR eleven of the past fifteen years.

BRIAN ROSENBERGER was last seen in the company of Sushi, a featured dancer at Innsmouth's infamous Thrills and Gills Gentleman's Club. Prior to that, his writings appeared in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine*, *Read by Dawn*, *Dark Jesters*, *Dead Men (and Women) Walking*, *Twisted Cat Tales* and more. His first chapbook, *Poems that GO SPLAT* is available from Naked Snake Press. Updates concerning his current whereabouts can be found at: home.earthlink.net/~brosenberger.

LEE ANN HOURY lives in old South Wales (where it rains a lot more than in the New one). His latest chapbook of short stories *NIGHT COUNTRY* is available through ProjectPulp.com. He is currently attempting to write a novella-length piece.

JASON DANIEL SMITH holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Roger Williams University and hopes to soon attain an MFA in the same. Though not always strictly horror, his writing usually contains dark elements. He has been previously published online and in print in such publications as *Ancient Heart*, *Circle*, *Prose Ax* and *Snakeskin*. Besides being a student and practitioner of the art of writing, Jason is also an amateur magician.

DAVIN IRELAND currently resides in the Netherlands. His fiction credits include stories published in a range of print magazines and anthologies, including *UNDERWORLDS*, *REVELATION*, *HOODZ*, *THE HORROR EXPRESS*, *NEO-OPIS*, *BLACK PETALS*, *HERE & NOW*, *ZAHIR*, *AESTHETICA*, *ALBEDO ONE*, *JPPN2*, *DARK ANIMUS*, *THE BLACKEST DEATH VOLUME II*, and *FUTURES MYSTERIOUS ANTHOLOGY MAGAZINE*.

DANIEL R. ROBICHAUD is the author of over 30 pieces of published fiction found in markets such as *Red Scream*, *Aberrant Dreams*, *Wee Small Hours*, *Forgotten Worlds*, and *FLORIDA HORROR* (anthology from Carnifex Press). Upcoming stories will appear in *UNTIL SOMEBODY LOSES AN EYE* (anthology edited by Jeff Strand and John McIlven), *VERMIN* (anthology from Carnifex Press), *WHEN THE WORLD RUNS THIN* (anthology from Carnifex Press), and *REVANANT 2* (anthology from Carnifex Press). His story "Chuck Cave and the Vanishing Vixen" (published under the pseudonym C.C. Blake) won the 2005 Story of the Year Award from *MAN'S STORY 2*.

J. D. WELLES' work has appeared in *AMITYVILLE HOUSE OF PANCAKES* ("The Girl in B-33"), *HELL HATH NO FURY*, *TRUTH*, *JUSTICE AND...* and *Cthulhu Sex* magazine. She is currently at work on a comedic horror novel set in Coney Island. Her website is <http://www.jdwelles.com>.

J.E. GURLEY is 52, lives with his wife, Kim, and two cats, Elsie and Smokey, in the mystical deserts of Arizona near Tucson and devotes full time to his writing. He has been published in numerous magazines and has published one novel, *GODSEED*. He has just completed his second novel, *OCCAM'S RAZOR*. Watch for it. Check out his website at: www.jamesgurley.com

JOE MCKINNEY is a homicide detective for the San Antonio Police Department and a professional, working writer. Five of his short stories appeared in the 33rd Volume of *HORROR MASTERS*, and in May, 2005, he won first place in both the short story and short-short story categories of CONduit's 15th Annual Professional Writing Competition. His first novel, *DEAD CITY*, which tells the story of a zombie outbreak that destroys the Texas Gulf Coast, will be published by Kensington Press in November of this year. Joe McKinney is also an active, voting member of the Horror Writer's Association (HWA). He lives in San Antonio with his wife Kristina and their two lovely daughters.